

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

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 27 SEPTEMBER 2023, SEMINAR ROOMS 1 & 2, PIERHEAD BUILDING, CARDIFF BAY

Attendees

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| 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 |
| Colonel Sion Walker (SW) | Deputy Commander 160 th (Welsh) Brigade |
| WO1 Robert Govier (RG) | Executive Warrant Officer, Naval Forces Wales |
| James Phillips (JP) | Veterans Commissioner for Wales |
| Adrian Leslie (AL) | Royal British Legion (RBL) |
| Councillor Lis Burnett (LB) | Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) |
| Rachel Morgan (RM) | WLGA |
| Shabina Aqil (SA) | Ministry of Justice (MoJ) |
| Janine Hamed (JH) | 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) |
| Tom Hall (TH) | BLESMA |
| Anna Bird (AB) | Cardiff & Vale UHB |
| Vickey Brindley (VB) | Navy Families Federation (RN-FF) |
| Zoe Roberts (ZR) | Betsi Cadwaladr UHB |
| Morgan Price (MP) (Guest) | Office of Veterans Affairs (OVA) |
| Craig Jones (CJ) (Guest) | Fighting with Pride |
| Hayley Edwards (HE) | AFLO – West Wales |
| Jamie Ireland (JI) | AFLO – Cwm Taf |
| Maisy Provan (MPr) | Cardiff & Vale UHB |
| 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 |
| Ceri Griffiths | Equity in Education |

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| Enfys Dixey (ED) | Equity in Education |
| Paul Morris (PM) | Police Liaison Officer |

Apologies

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| Darren Millar MS | Chair, Senedd Cross Party Group Armed Forces and Cadets |
| Jonathan Price | Veterans Welfare Service, Ministry of Defence |
| Roy Brown | COBSEO |
| Steve Boswell | SSAFA |
| Fiona Jenkins | Cardiff & Vale UHB |
| Sarah Rhodes | WG Housing |

Item 1. Welcome and Introductions

1.1 The DMSP welcomed attendees to the meeting.

1.2 The DMSP noted the meeting would be the last for Air Officer Wales Adrian Williams and formally thanked him for his contribution to the RAF and Armed Forces Community in Wales.

1.3 Tom Hall representing BLESMA was welcomed to his first meeting and Craig Jones (FWP) was welcomed as guest speaker.

Item 2. Minutes and Actions from the last meeting

2.1 The minutes from the last meeting were agreed and the actions agreed as complete/closed.

2.2 The Commissioner noted the Operation Fortitude homelessness initiative being delivered by the OVA and informed the meeting that Alabare had been successful in securing funding in Wales (the charity has 37 supported housing beds for veterans and are often at or near capacity). The Commissioner also cited the good practice of the Welsh Veterans Partnership and his concern about its ability to continue operating should key personnel decide they no longer wish to continue. The Commissioner was keen to explore how the charity might be supported, for example through other charities and the Housing Associations it has developed a relationship with. Whilst Alabare's funding was seen as positive, AL referred to RBL casework which provided evidence of veterans not being able to move on from veterans supported housing. It was noted that Alabare's funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust included money for a pan-Wales scoping study which was expected to start shortly and which would enable greater visibility on both the challenges and opportunities and possible ways forward on veterans' homelessness in Wales

2.3 Given the various issues Housing was suggested as potential area for the next deep dive for the AFEG to examine. Armed Forces Branch would liaise with Housing policy colleagues to take this forward.

| Actions | Responsible | Due |
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| 1. Housing to be considered for the next deep dive topic. Armed Forces Branch to liaise with Housing policy colleagues to take this forward. | Armed Forces Team | By March 2024 |

Item 3. Due Regard Duty – Deep Dive

3.1 The DMSP reminded the Group of the discussions at the previous meeting where it was agreed that the Group would undertake a series of ‘deep dives’ to consider key policy areas in detail considering the issues impacting on the Armed Forces community.

3.2 PK explained that the aim of the first deep dive session was to consider progress and identify ways forward in the development of the ‘Due Regard Duty’ for the benefit of the Armed Forces community. PK went on to explain that external subject matter experts had been invited provide feedback from those working closely at the delivery-end of the ‘due regard’ policy across health, education and local government.

3.3 Contributors provided a short overview of progress, key initiatives, barriers and future opportunities.

Health – Maisy Provan and Zoe Roberts

3.4 Maisy outlined key progress, including training of staff regarding the ‘Due Regard Duty’, awareness raising events held within LHBs and initiatives such as the establishment of an All-Wales LHB Group to share best practice and experiences.

3.5 Challenges include differing IT systems across LHBs and nationally for sharing information, pressures on the NHS in terms of capacity/waiting times, lack of funding for dedicated roles and training capacity of departments.

3.6 Opportunities going forward included partnering with charities such as the Defence Medical Welfare Service and SSAFA. The GP accreditation scheme was seen as an opportunity to focus attention on the Armed Forces Community.

Education – Millie Taylor Supporting Service Children in Education Cymru (SSCE Cymru)

3.7 The SSCE Cymru project had developed e-learning training to increase awareness of Service children and the ‘Due Regard Duty’ in collaboration with the AFLOs across Wales. The Armed Forces Friendly Schools scheme is an initiative awarding schools for activity in support of Service Children.

3.8 Barriers included identification and securing accurate data on Service Children numbers and multiple definitions of service children being used. It was suggested there are also limitations for service children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). SSCE identified as an issue how funding to support Service Children is inconsistent

across the UK and short-term / project based. It was noted that for 2023/24 Welsh Government are funding the SSCE Cymru project and the Regional Schools Liaison Officers.

3.9 Millie suggested improvements would be formal identification of service children and the alignment of definitions with the 'Due Regard Duty'.

Local Government / AFLOs – Jamie Ireland and Hayley Edwards

3.10 AFLOs noted the positive impact of the Duty in providing greater clarity to local authorities on the Armed Forces Community and how policies should be applied. It had also seen improvements locally in data and identification including via the Census and through local services 'asking the question'. Collaboration was seen as a particular strength in Wales with regional and local Armed Forces forums and meetings between lead officers and departments to consider the Duty. The AFLOs reported Third Sector interest in the Covenant as increasing, with greater awareness and engagement with programmes such as the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme.

3.11 Current weaknesses cited by the AFLOs included social care not currently being within scope; differing interpretations across different areas of what the 'Due Regard Duty' means; demonstrating the impact of applying the Duty; the absence of any statutory requirement for a needs assessment of the local Armed Forces Community; the capacity of AFLOs to provide the level of support required and delays to the AFLO evaluation.

Discussion

3.12 RG sought clarification on the Welsh Government definition of Service Children definition. PE explained that when the definition was produced (which was prior to the 'Due Regard Duty') Welsh Government had consulted with MOD and the Families Federations to ensure that the children of those who had left the forces were not disadvantaged on their first move after transition. Therefore, the Welsh Government definition classed children as 'Service Children' up to two years after service to ensure families going through transition were not disadvantaged when returning to Wales, for example, when accessing schools. JS, speaking for MOD, stated that the definition should be taken from statute in the Armed Forces Act 2021 and MOD colleagues would be happy to offer advice and guidance on definitions.

3.13 In relation to Social Care, JS stated that it could still be considered under the Covenant despite the duty not explicitly including it within scope. He explained Policymakers have the flexibility to apply the Covenant to areas they see fit. JS indicated the issue of a statutory assessment of the 'Due Regard Duty' would be looked at by MOD.

3.14 RM highlighted the WLGA Champions' forum and its role in assessing delivery through its regular meetings.

3.15 AW commented that the increased data provided by the 2021 Census and the Veterans Survey will have a role in embedding and spreading best practice. AW asked if all local authorities had re-signed the Covenant as he saw the Act of re-

signing to reference the ‘Due Regard Duty’ as one way to help increase awareness. It was agreed that the WLGA would provide an update to the next meeting on the status of the Covenant across Local Authorities – whilst all had signed, a picture of re-signings and Defence Employer Recognition Scheme status could be useful reference material.

3.16 CG outlined the collaborative working between Welsh Government education team and SSCE Cymru. Data collection has been on a voluntary basis for schools, working with SSCE Cymru, and Welsh Government were examining data collection for Service Children and other potentially vulnerable learners. CG identified that any changes to requirements for data collection will require amendments to Welsh education regulations. It was agreed that ALN issues should be raised with the relevant team in Welsh Government.

3.17 KP asked what plans were in place to evaluate the progress made against the Duty to date. JS stated that MOD are examining methods of measuring effectiveness of the duty and the Armed Forces team were involved.

3.18 actions identified from the discussion:

| Actions | Responsible | Due |
|---|-------------------|--|
| 2. ALN issues to be raised with relevant team in Welsh Government. | Armed Forces Team | By end Dec 2023. |
| 3. MOD Covenant team to feed back on progress on consideration of statutory assessments in relation to due regard and on proposed methods of measuring effectiveness. | John Shivas | Update to next meeting or sooner if available. |
| 4. WLGA to provide an update at the next meeting on Covenant signings. | Rachel Morgan | Update to next meeting or sooner if available. |

Item 4. LGBT Veterans Independent Review

4.1 Craig Jones provided attendees with an update on the LGBT Veterans Independent Review (the Etherton Review) and the ongoing work that Fighting with Pride (FWP) was undertaking regarding historical mistreatment of LGBT Veterans pre-2000.

4.2 CJ outlined the person-centred approach that FWP were taking, reflecting the breadth of views within the community. CJ briefed the Group on the recommendations of the review were presented including the UK Government apology, plans for the restoration of medals and also for financial compensation.

4.3 The suggestions for the Devolved Nations including Wales were discussed. The Review had identified how Health and Social Services in particular, needed to provide an environment that was supportive and understanding of a particularly vulnerable group. A significant element of this was providing visible confidence and assurance through kitemarking and the FWP Pride in Veterans Standard was a way of achieving this. It was noted that good progress had been made in Wales with organisations signing up to the Pride in Veterans Standard, in particular LHBs, Veterans NHS Wales, local authorities and the Third Sector.

4.4 JF asked about size of the LGBT+ veteran population in Wales. CJ explained that veterans being aware of the Review and feeling confident in identifying themselves had been part of the challenge. Fieldwork and events and publicity around the Review had been helpful but there were probably still more to come forward. CJ further explained that a recent FWP data survey included 45 participants from Wales of the 290 total.

4.5 The DMSP highlighted the work Welsh Government and the sector had done to promote the review and mentioned her visit the support group in South Wales which had been established by the AFLOs and FWP and funded initially by Welsh Government. the Minister has met with the Deputy Minister for Social Services to discuss implications for care settings and keen not undertake visits and promote awareness of the issue. Meeting also held with Deputy Minister for Mental health and wellbeing and will be discussing with the Minister for Veterans Affairs in October.

4.6 The Commissioner referred to his recent meeting with Labrats, a Nuclear Test Veterans charity who operate across the UK but are based in Wales. He saw similarities in the two groups' campaigns for recognition and righting of historic issues with continuing legacy issues. He asked if FWP could link with campaigners supporting Nuclear Test Veterans to share experiences and strategies.

Item 5. Updates from Tri-Services

Royal Navy/Royal Marines

5.1 JF highlighted that 7% of Royal Navy joiners are from Wales with 1500 currently living in Wales, often travelling across the UK to work. Engagement has been a feature of the period including at the Royal Welsh Show along with the other services. HMS Cardiff is being built and the singer Katherine Jenkins is going to be associated with the vessel. He also explained that D-Day 80 commemorations were in the planning stage for events in 2024.

Army

5.2 NT updated on Army activity which has focused on winter preparedness and engagement work. He made the point that 7% of the Army from Wales' with Wales share of UK population being 5%. He identified work to engage and recruit across Wales as a priority. He looked ahead to Exercise Cambrian Patrol which would again provide a key focus with 120 teams including 30 international partners and that 12 October would see Welsh Government and other partners visiting the event.

Royal Air Force

5.3 AW updated attendees on a successful visit for Senedd Members to St. Athan to find out about engagement work of the RAF and work with young people. AW will be conducting a handover with the successor and will ensure Welsh Government are updated on developments.

Item 6. Brief Organisational Updates / AOB

6.1 AL gave an update on the upcoming Wales Festival of Remembrance due to take place at St. Davids Hall in Cardiff. He explained that due to the ongoing issue with Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) the venue might be changed to the Cathedral (now confirmed as St Davids Metropolitan Cathedral in Cardiff city centre) The RBL will send out an update regarding this event in due course. AL also requested that WG officials circulate the RBL’s Wales manifesto to members of the group.

6.2 DM updated on the Employer Recognition Scheme with 20% increase across all awards. He highlighted that there has been a slight drop in Bronze Awards so request that all partners continue to promote across networks and for support from all attending in identifying opportunities to promote the Scheme

| Action | Responsible | Due |
|---|-------------|-------------------------|
| 5: All attendees to explore opportunities to promote ERS. | All | As opportunity presents |

Summary of Actions

| Actions | Responsible | Due |
|---|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Housing to be considered as the next deep dive topic. Armed Forces Branch to liaise with Housing policy colleagues to take this forward. | Armed Forces Team | By March 2024 |
| 2. ALN issues to be raised with relevant team in Welsh Government. | Armed Forces Team | By end Dec 2023. |
| 3. MOD Covenant team to feed back to the group on progress on consideration of statutory assessments in relation to due regard. | John Shivas | Update to next meeting |

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| | | or sooner if available. |
| 4. WLGA to provide an update at the next meeting on Covenant signings. | Rachel Morgan | Update to next meeting or sooner if available. |
| 5. All attendees to explore opportunities to promote ERS with RFCA. | All | As opportunity presents |