



Proposed New Entity to Promote the Wellbeing of Defence Members and Veterans

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Submitted to:

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

Consultation: The Social Deck

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Introduction

Lived Experience Australia Ltd (LEA) is a national representative organisation for Australian mental health consumers and carers, families and kin, formed in 2002. Our 'friends' include more than 6000 people with lived experience of mental health concerns, including suicide and suicidality, across Australia. We recognise that some of our 'friends' network includes veterans and their families. All members of our Board and staff have mental health lived experience as either a consumer, family carer or both. This is core to our advocacy, recognising that the impacts of policy and practice are felt not only by individuals, but also by families and whole communities.

Our core business is to advocate for effective policies and systemic change to improve mental health care, services and support across the whole Australian health and social care system, including within State and Territory jurisdictions.

LEA is also a community partner of Open Door, a multi-disciplinary research hub at Flinders University dedicated to researching the experiences of military service, and the social health needs of veterans and their families in transition and post military service. LEA's Executive Director, Professor Sharon Lawn, is also Co-Director of Open Door alongside Professor Ben Wadham, providing research leadership and mentorship in relation to Lived Experience research and support. Sharon is currently leading a project for DVA with members of the Open Door team on the culture of the Claims process within DVA for Secretary Alison Frame.

In summary, we are aware that past Liberal and Labour governments have paid insufficient attention to the issue of Veteran suicide and suicidality, and to the systems that support them such as the Department of Veterans Affairs. For example, the former Morrison government cut several positions within the public service and reduced the DVA full-time workforce during its time in office. We believe that this has contributed to many of the pressures now facing the Department and its staff and therefore the quality of support to Veterans and their families. We believe providing a supportive and respectful working environment that is sufficiently resourced, and with an effective independent Entity to provide oversight, will equate to providing the best services for Veterans and their families.

We are very aware of the importance of this proposed new entity. There have been 57 inquiries into the Veteran sector since 1970, producing more than 700 recommendations, but with very few of them implemented. In 2005, an independent body was recommended out of the Military Justice Review; however, this was vetoed and then pondered for the next 10 years by successive governments, without clear progress. The current proposed entity is therefore very welcome.

What we want is an independent body to oversee how the recommendations are done. However, we do not want this to be an exercise that allows the government to say 'job fixed'; it also needs to have investigatory power and powers to hold systems to account – to have 'teeth'. The proposed entity should report directly to Parliament because we don't want another report or another body which is driven by cronyism. That mindset must change.

That said, the proposed entity should have a very strong lived experience element to it, with diversity of lived experience. This means that steering groups informing the entity's work must have Veterans at its core, not merely be populated by the heads of organisations such as the ESO Round Table (ESORT) or the RSL. It must include young men and women veterans, the family members and children, those who are just out of service, and those that have been around in the veteran advocacy space for a while.

We acknowledge service members' and Veterans' service to our country, and also their families who support them. We welcome the opportunity to provide our feedback to this crucially important national issue.

Purpose of this Consultation

As the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide moves towards its final report, we must consider what the future looks like to prevent and reduce the instances of suicide and to improve the mental health and wellbeing of our current and ex-serving Defence members. The issue of suicide and suicidality among Defence personnel and veterans needs a long-term focus that continues well after the Royal Commission has concluded.

The Australian Government and its agencies and officials need to be accountable for their responses to the Royal Commission's Report, including to implement recommendations. They also need to be accountable in the long term for preventing suicide and suicidality among Defence members and veterans and for promoting their wellbeing.

One major proposal in support of this is to establish an oversight body, of appropriate purpose, scope and authority, to be a catalyst for continuous improvement. To help achieve this outcome, the Royal Commission is considering recommending that the Australian Government establish a new oversight body focused on holding government agencies to account for the wellbeing of Defence members and veterans and to support them to improve the wellbeing of Defence members and veterans—through continued research and other work.

Our response to the consultation questions

Reasons for establishing a new entity include:

- Ensuring change happens, given a large number of previous inquiries relevant to suicide prevention among Defence members and veterans have failed to secure transformative action.
- Addressing a grave and systemic problem; the Royal Commission inquiries showing that the problem is worse than previously thought.
- Maintaining relevance now and in the future requires an entity that can continually review, monitor and evaluate the Royal Commission's recommendations, their implementation and effectiveness.
- A more holistic approach that includes considerations across a spectrum of agencies and portfolios.
- Independent oversight and accountability; an external monitoring body can, through its inquiries and reports, assist the Government to hold Defence's top leadership to account and assist the public to hold the Government to account.

1) Do you agree with the reasons outlined for establishing a new entity? If not, why not?

Yes, the cultural work that is essential requires independence to hear from DVA staff too.

2) Are there any additional reasons for establishing a new entity?

This entity was proposed many years ago. It is time to do this. There is no better time. The evidence is irrefutable.

3) Taking account of all factors, should a new entity be recommended by the Royal Commission and established?

Absolutely.

Principles of design

The Royal Commission suggests that the following principles could inform the design of a new entity.

- The entity's design and governance must be informed by Defence members, veterans, family members and others with lived experience and expertise.
- The entity must be strong and independent, including of the ADF and DVA.
- The framework of the entity should be designed before the end of the Royal Commission but have regard to, and be consistent with, the reports of the Royal Commission and to the institutional context (i.e., what other relevant bodies are doing).
- Any new arrangements should not absolve the ADF and other relevant authorities of their responsibility and accountability for Defence members' and veterans' wellbeing.
- The entity and its activities must operate in a trauma-informed way.

1) Do you agree with the suggested principles listed above? If not, why not?

Yes.

2) Should any other principles be added to the list?

DVA staff should be added to the list of stakeholders to inform its design and governance. Both more recent and longer serving DVA staff have enormous knowledge of the day-to-day interface with Veterans and their families. They are not always asked for their views, and we believe they should be.

Also, will there be any educative role for the workforce as part of the entity's work?

The entity should be underpinned by a holistic veteran-centric view. It should not be dominated by a clinical perspective that has, for too long, perpetuated the idea that Veterans are 'broken'. There should be a balance of perspectives informing the principles.

Purpose of a new entity

It is proposed that the purpose of a new entity could include **to contribute to improving the wellbeing of Defence members and veterans and preventing suicide and suicidality—from the time of their recruitment into the ADF and for the rest of their lives.**

The Royal Commission wants to receive feedback on this purpose. In practice, the functions of a new entity could encompass a range of activities, including:

- a) monitoring and reporting on the extent of the adoption, implementation and success of the Royal Commission's recommendations and selected recommendations made by other inquiries (past, present and future)
- b) analysing, and recommending improvements to, Defence, DVA and other agencies' policies, programs, systems and practices that affect Defence members' and veterans' wellbeing
- c) examining and reporting on the cultures of the ADF, DVA and other relevant agencies
- d) monitoring and reporting on:

- i. suicide data and trends
 - ii. wellbeing data and trends
 - iii. information and data about factors that contribute to suicide and suicidality
 - iv. information and data about factors that contribute to wellbeing
 - v. evolving understanding of wellbeing, suicide and suicidality (through literature reviews, maintaining contact with relevant institutions and otherwise)
 - vi. becoming a repository of data and research outcomes relevant to Defence and veteran wellbeing (including suicide and suicidality prevention)
 - vii. conducting and commissioning research relevant to Defence and veteran wellbeing, suicide and suicidality and contributing to the formulation of the research priorities of relevant institutions
 - viii. investigating systemic or other issues affecting Defence and veteran wellbeing
- e) engaging with relevant stakeholders, through various means, including roundtables, workshops and other forums.

1) Is the proposed purpose of the entity appropriate?

In general, Yes. However, we note that gender equity and diversity issues are not mentioned. Having undertaken research recently, focused on the experience of transition and identity for women veterans, it is clear that there are several specific concerns for this group that such an entity should include in its purpose.

2) Do the functions listed above represent what a new entity should do?

We believe that this should include families of Veterans too. Veterans do not exist separate to the context of the families that support them once they transition. Families are a vital link to community for Veterans.

3) Should the entity's inquiry and reporting functions be widely or narrowly conceived? For example, should it:

- a. be limited to inquiry and reporting of the ADF, or to include the DVA and other government agencies that affect the wellbeing of Defence members and veterans?
- b. look at the operations of State and Territory governments to the extent that they affect veterans and non-government organisations and issues?

We believe it should include inquiry and reporting on any agency that impacts Defence members' and Veterans' wellbeing. The cultures that have led to the Royal Commission have many intersecting parts that must be considered in context.

Governance and powers of the new entity

To deliver this, it is proposed that the new entity could:

- a) be headed by its own official / head (e.g. a commissioner)
- b) be free of direction by Ministers or others
- c) have an Advisory Council so that it is continually informed by experts including people with lived experience
- d) have powers to enable it to deliver its functions, such as powers:
 - i. to hold hearings (including summoning witnesses), both public and private
 - ii. to issue notices requiring the production of documents and the giving of information
 - iii. to be regularly updated with information from Defence, DVA and others (that is, should it be able to enter into arrangements that give it access to databases or to receive organised data regularly supplied, without having to issue notice after notice)
 - iv. to enter into joint investigations or inquiries with other bodies (e.g. the Australian Federal Police, the National Anti-Corruption Commission, the Human Rights Commission and coronial offices).
- e) have its own budgetary allocation
- f) be required to report annually to Parliament on its work and be able to report to Parliament on specific matters, with recommendations, when it considers such a report appropriate
- g) have power to report, publicly or confidentially, with recommendations, to Ministers and other public officials (as appropriate to the circumstances of the subject and the purpose of the new entity)
- h) not be subject to public interest immunity and other objections, immunities and privileges.

1) Are the proposed governance arrangements and powers appropriate for the new entity?

We support the proposed governance arrangements. The important thing is that this entity has 'teeth' to effect improvement and ensure the many recommendations that have been derived from so many inquiries already, and now the current Royal Commission, are actioned.

2) If an Advisory Council is supported, what kinds of people should serve on it (e.g. next of kin of Defence members and veterans who have died by suicide, serving members, veterans, and their families)?

Please see our earlier response about the diversity of members of such a group.

- 3) What else should be said, in legislation or otherwise, about the design and operation of a new entity?
- 4) Are there other considerations for how a new entity might operate?

Contact

We thank the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide for the opportunity to put our views forward. We wish you well with the next steps and would be keen to contribute our lived experience perspectives to any future discussions about this important topic.

Your sincerely

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