

Cross-Party Group on The Armed Forces and Veterans Community

25 Jan 2022 at 6:00pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

Finlay Carson, MSP; Katy Clark MSP (*Represented by Valerie Reid*); Keith Brown MSP; Maurice Golden, MSP; and Paul Sweeney, MSP.

Invited guests

Scottish Mens Sheds Association; SPARKO TV.

Non-MSP Group Members

Aileen Grant; Alison Howard; Ally Gemmell; Ashley Atkins; Beverly Bergman; Bill Bowman; Brig Andrew Muddiman; Caldwell, Frank D; Caroline Cooke; Carolyn MacLeod; Charles Wallace; Clair Bryan; David Gibson; Emma Perrin; Fiona Maxwell; Frank Gribben; Gavin Davey; Gerri Matthews-Smith; Graham Meacher; Ian Stewart; Jason Schroeder; Jim Wilson; Joe Stanfield; John Mooney; Karen Elliot; Kari Magee; Kate Mccullough; Kevin Gray; Laura Falconer; Leanne Bonner; Lesley Iannarelli; Maj Lee Baines; Mark Horsham; Maura Lynch; Maurice Corry; Michelle Ferguson; Moira Bayne; Morevain Martin; Moti Bari Barmherzig; Nicoletta Primo; Orit; Page, David; Paula Glen; Ross Thomson; Sandra Cheyne; Sarah Rogers; Sender Gross; Shaun Cauvin; Sheridan Parry; Steven Elliot; Stoops, William; Support Manager; Susan Young; Tony Carruthers; Vicky Brindley.

Apologies

Jackie Bailley, MSP; Willie Rennie, MSP; Edward Mountain, MSP; Katy Clark MSP (represented); Jim Castle, GCU; Ian Cumming, Erskine.

Agenda item 1

Introductions and Opening Remarks Maurice Golden MSP (Convenor) and Maurice Corry (Chair).

Maurice Golden opened the meeting, he thanked all who were attending and recognised that some would need to leave prior to the scheduled finish time. He noted in particular the attendance of MSPs and highlighted that Keith Brown MSP,

Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans was going to be speaking during the meeting. He then handed over to Maurice Corry as Chair. Mr Corry noted that Charlie Wallace, Scottish Veterans Commissioner, was attending and that this was likely to be Mr Wallace's last CPG. Mr Corry thanked him for his valuable contribution to the CPG over the last three years and also for the series of reports and updates that he has provided during his tenure. Mr Corry then invited Mr Brown to update the Group.

Agenda item 2

Attendance: As recorded above

Agenda item 3

Minutes of the meeting of 22 Sep 2021

Minutes of the previous meeting of 22 Sep 2021, which were reviewed following Mr Brown's presentation were agreed as an accurate record. There were no matters arising from the minutes that were not due to be considered as part of the agenda.

Agenda item 4

Update on Veterans – Keith Brown MSP Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans

Mr Brown thanks Mr Corry and Mr Golden for the opportunity to update the Group and emphasised that he is keen to be involved with it. He thanked Mr Graeme Dey MSP, his predecessor as Minister with responsibility for Veterans. Mr Brown said that he had, on 5th November, provided an update within the Parliament and was pleased to see the continuing cross-party approach and support for those who have served. He recognised that the vast majority of those leaving the Services do so well and make a contribution to our society.

There are areas that this can be improved, and the transition of the obligations to the Armed Forces Covenant into law increase the importance of this. Whilst the Strategy for our Veterans had been affected by the pandemic, its aims remain valid and it will continue to develop. He recognised the contribution made by members of the Serving Community in assisting the civil authorities during the pandemic and in other emergencies such as Storm Arwen; he highlighted that whilst the work of the serving community is largely a reserved matter, many members of that community come from within Scotland and taxes paid within Scotland contribute to them.

He identified the recent increase to the Scottish Veterans Fund, to £500k, for which bids will be considered in the near future. He also highlighted the Armed Forces Third Sector Resilience Fund which had already allocated some £800k and there was a further £200k available which had been re-opened.

He thanked the Scottish Veterans Commissioner for his work and for the reports that have been published in recent years; the recommendations in these reports had been

accepted. He highlighted the importance of effective transition, in particular for early service leavers.

Examples of work that is being progressed include:

- He was working within the Government to develop a cross-government approach to veterans matters.
- The Scottish Veterans Care Network and mental Health Action Plan.
- Linking military qualifications to civilian ones.
- Improving the information available and routes to Housing, Health and Employment services for those in transition from the Services.
- Recognising that the treatment of women and of the LGBTI community within the Services was not good in the past. Steps should be taken to rectify adverse treatment that was experienced; he had recently spoken with UK SoS for Defence on the subject of Inclusion.

There followed the opportunity to raise questions and to make observations on what Mr Brown had discussed. Subsequent discussion included:

- Linking statutory service providers to vulnerable Service leavers.
- Ensuring that information is available in respect of Education support for spouses of serving personnel. In particular funding for courses in FE and HE, although reciprocal arrangements may be in place, they can be complex to navigate. It was recognised that SDS, as well as universities such as Edinburgh Napier and Glasgow Caledonian may have a part to play in improving the information available.
- A matter relating to War Widows Pensions was discussed, in particular when death in service was due to illness. It was suggested that this is a reserved matter, however it is one that could benefit from further research.
- Successful transition into employment is important; this includes setting employment aspirations at a level commensurate with skills and experience. Retraining at HE and FE must be considered as an option, for example many servicemen and women could make first rate members of the caring professions; Universities such as Edinburgh Napier are well placed to provide advice on what options may be available in the profession as well as information on funding and the training process.
- The important part that is played by Drop In Centres must not be underestimated. There are many examples of good practice including the at Erskine Reid McEwan Activity Centre and various centres linked to ASDIC.

Agenda item 5

Update on Covid and its impact on Veterans Organisations

There had been little significant change to the update on the impact that the pandemic was having on veterans and veterans' organisations since the previous meeting.

Agenda item 6

Housing Update - Kevin Gray CEO Veterans Housing Scotland

Kevin Gray updated the Group on the Veterans Scotland Housing Group Report into Veterans' Homelessness Prevention Pathway report. Importantly, the report has recognised that veterans are not over-represented in Homelessness statistics. He summarised the key recommendations from the report, there are 24 recommendations in the report. The full report can be found at: [Veterans-Homelessness-Prevention-Pathway-20.1.21.pdf \(homelessnetwork.scot\)](https://www.homelessnetwork.scot/veterans-homelessness-prevention-pathway-20.1.21.pdf)

Subsequent discussion informed the Group that the JSHAO will transition to become part of the Defence Business Service organisation and within the Defence Transition Service. There was some discussion around whether or not vacant quarters could be used to ease the housing shortfalls; it was recognised that this falls under reserved matters.

The Chair thanked Kevin Gray for his comprehensive update.

Agenda item 7

Guest Updates:

Scottish Men's Sheds Association – Jason Schroeder CEO SMSA (TBC)

Mr Schroeder informed the Group on the role of the SMSA, an organisation that assists disenfranchised men by providing places to go, to work together and socialise; in short, it provides Health, Company, Care and Joy. Whilst statistics on the proportions of veterans that are involved are not taken – the organisation is open to all – it is fair to assume that veterans participate in SMSA activity. Subsequent discussion recognised the importance of such activity and the value accrued to those attending. Activities like this provide for prevention of mental health issues and were described by Mr Schroeder as 'therapy without being therapised'. His presentation concluded with a short video of the activity in one of the Men's Sheds. The Chair thanked Mr Schroeder for his presentation on SMSA which clearly plays an important role for many people.

SPARKO TV – Karen Elliot RNA

SPARKO TV is an easy to use video communication medium which was described, along with the benefits that come from it. Short videos were played demonstrating the features and benefits of the system. It was recognised that such a system has great value in reducing social isolation and loneliness. The Chair thanked Karen and the other presenters, Mori, Orit and Sender for letting us know about a useful system.

Role and TOR's of Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee (VAPC) David Page Chair VAPC Scotland

Mr Page described the role and functions of the VAPCs, of which there are 13 in the UK. VAPCs are manned by voluntary members and work with MOD, OVA and with Defence Welfare Services. He had recently had a very good meeting with Mr Keith Brown MSP informing him about their role. The main purpose of VAPCs is to provide a distinct and identifiable point of reference for veterans and to raise awareness of the support services that may be available for them. A copy of the VAPCs Terms of Reference are attached for further information.

Agenda item 8

Any Other Business

- a. Lesley Iannarelli provided an overview of the services that are provided by Solicitors for the Armed Forces Community (Scotland) which she runs, and which seeks to provide an analysis of the services that a member of the Community may need and signposts the individual to a suitable adviser.
- b. Jim Wilson provided a short update on the steps that the Scottish Government are taking to promote Public Appointments to veterans.

Dates of future meetings:

Dates for future meetings were identified as:

- **25 Jan 22**
- ~~13 Apr 22~~ – Amended to **16 Mar 22** due to local authority elections
- **22 Jun 22**
- **20 Sep 22**

It is hoped that such meetings will take place within the Scottish Parliament building, however this is subject to pandemic restrictions.