

**Scotland Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee (VAPC) Meeting Minutes**  
**Thursday the 24th of November 2022 (17:00-19:00), Held at Audrey Capital, 10 Coates**  
**Crescent, Edinburgh, EX3 7AL.**

**Present:** Alan Hamilton, Chair (AH); Huw Sherrard, Secretary (HS); Andrew Ward (AW); Sue Raw (SRa); Jim Wilson (JW); Stuart Robert (SRo); Audrey Cuthbertson (AC); Iain Findlay (IF); William Lindsay (WL); Megan Brackley (MB); Alexander Reid (AR).

**Apologies:** Ally Gemmel (AG); Donald Prentice (DP); Mike McCourt (MMcC); Mark Logie (ML); Laura Cox (LC).

**1. Welcome and Apologies**

AH noted correspondence now appointing him as Chair, and welcomed those attending. HS noted apologies, as well as the resignation of Paul Cleugh on the 7th of November 2022. The Committee approved the previous minutes.

**2. Previous Minutes**

The Committee approved the previous minutes.

**3. Sub Committees**

AH began by noting the Committee's statutory duties under Handbook, and opened discussion about reforming and rejuvenating the Committee's Sub-Committees. AC noted contributions of the Finance and Debt Sub-Committee, and that they had been valuable. AR shared similar views. HS highlighted the issues with attendance within the Committee, and whether having as many Sub-Committees as were currently instituted was necessary. SRo agreed, and suggested that merging them sensibly would be beneficial.

AW queried the basis and reason for their establishment. SRo said that the West Scotland VAPC had had four historically. AH stated that they were on the Committees' official aims and their Terms of Reference, however meeting those aims should be viable without numerous Sub-Committees. SRo stated that it came down to identifying a few synergies, rather than having the current widespread scope - working with COSLA and RFCAs would cover a vast number of them.

JW highlighted the work of Veterans Scotland, and that an important step in this process would be to identify the message as well as to establish communication in the first place - i.e. reflecting on the question 'What challenges do veterans face?'. SRo supported JW's point, in that having a message is important to establishing these communication links with various authorities. AH described how the main focus of the recent training [Item 5] was not on the Armed Forces Covenant, but on the pensions and compensation component of the VACPs' role.

SRo outlined that, when they had first joined the VAPC, the focus had been on compensation, but in current circumstances should be on the 'Advisory' in Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee. IF described that the 'Pensions' was a key issue with the Committee's image, as it now had little purview in that regard.

AR shared that the Aberdeenshire Firmbase meeting in June had been useful, and that LC had said “forget about the name - cross devolution is a benefit, we can listen for and seek to influence UKGov” - but noted that the Committee was stuck in a difficult situation. AH summarised that if the Committee wanted Sub-Committees, it can have them - if they don't we won't. There was also the potential to move towards locality-based Sub-Committees.

DY asked whether a change to the VAPCs' statutory instruments would help. In response, AH covered part of Item 6. The Chairs had met with Andrew Morrison MP, who had only been in office as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families for around a fortnight. There would be comments from him in due course on statutory change, though AH noted the lack of action from Morrison's predecessors. Chairs outlined Committees' difficulties with their reporting duties all falling due in November, and Morrison agreed to adjust this. On the legal side, there was a Private Member's Bill to reform the VAPCs, with a second reading due in February 2023, however there was the potential that reform would be delayed - and the next Armed Services Bill would be in 2025.

JW asked what we could ask the Minister to influence now, pensions and claims being an area that takes a long period of time: where there areas in which the Minister could be making improvements to now, but was not? AH noted that staff were being recruited for Defence Transition Services now. Additionally, where areas were devolved, the Committee was of course unable to work with the Minister as a member of the UK Government. AC described that reviews and progress on many of the pensions and compensation schemes had been protracted, and was having a major effect on veterans' wellbeing. Recent digitisation only covered the form, but not the process as a whole: the processed immediately returned to being analogue afterwards. AC noted a number of other issues with the process - including adversarial appeals panels. WL objected to appeals panels being described as 'adversarial', and that the remit and purview of the panels was limited in the way it could support claimants.

AH summarised the discussion as a desire to cut back on the number of Sub-Committees, and the Committee asking: 'What can the Minister do?'; 'What does the VAPC want?'

#### **4. Recruitment of New Members**

AH described the process for the appointment of new members of the VAPC. AH also noted the vacancy in the office of Vice Chair for the Committee, and asked members to put themselves forward if interested. AW said they would be willing to fill the role. The Committee held a ballot, and elected AW unanimously, with a review period as soon as the next Chair was appointed.

#### **5. Overview of Training at Norcross**

AH introduced the agenda item, which he and AC had attended. AC had had a positive experience, describing the benefit as providing insight into the outdated process: providing the example that papers were still being bussed up and down manually. Staff

had been welcoming and friendly, but frank and honest with Committee members. AH agreed it was a positive experience, and that staff were working as well as they could in difficult conditions - Scotland ahead in some areas. AH recommended other Committee members take up the opportunity if possible, preferably in person.

#### **6. Overview of National Chairs' Conference**

AH continued on from the discussion of Item 6 that had occurred under Item 3. AH outlined how most of the discussion was about claims. Membership and attendance was also an issue nationwide for VAPCs, but AH noted that the Committee can also co-opt individuals to address this.

AH noted that a civil servant from DEFRA will be conducting an independent review of VAPCs. This might potentially lead to the abolition of, but that appeared unlikely.

#### **7. Armed Forces Covenant and Boards**

AH noted that the Item had been partially covered already. DY highlighted ties with Lowland RFCAs that may be useful. AW asked how corporate bodies can engage with AFC, SRo outlined how to engage with the RFCA to go through the process.

#### **8. Future Activity**

AH highlighted how the Item had been discussed throughout the meeting. AH asked for volunteers to consult on updating the Terms of Reference. AH asked HS to circulate.

#### **9. AOCB**

AR outlined an opportunity to attend the Veterans Aberdeenshire meeting on the 25th of November 2022. AR agreed to send details to HS, who would then share with other members.

AW suggested that 'Defence Balance Scorecards' would be potentially useful for the Committee, and that a discussion could be held next meeting.

HS reminded Committee members that there was provision to reimburse travel and other costs.

**Signed as true on 26/01/23 by Alan Hamilton, Chair:**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Alan Hamilton', written over a horizontal line.