

Social Security Act 1989

North East Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee

Minutes of meeting held on 31 August 2012 at 101 (Northumbrian) Regiment Royal Artillery Kingston Park TA Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne.

Present:	Mr P E Kingham (<i>Chairman</i>)	(PK)
	Lt Col J Heron TD (<i>Vice Chairman</i>)	(JH)
	Mrs S Crosby	(SC)
	Mr A deCourtney- Wellum	(ACW)
	Lt Col B G de la Haye OBE	(BDH)
	Mrs J V Gibson CBE	(VG)
	Mr B Halfpenny	(BH)
	Dr D Mayes	(DM)
	Mr A Maylett	(AM)
	Mr P Sinclair	(PS)
	Maj A J P Watson TD (<i>Secretary</i>)	(AW)
	Mr J Welford-Carroll	(JWC)
In Attendance:	Mr J Parkin (Director of Veterans Services SPVA)	(JP)
	Mr A Heron (VWS)	(AH)
Apologies:	Mr P Murnane	

Welcome and Introduction.

The Chairman welcomed everyone, especially the new members, to the meeting which commenced at 1030 and it was generally agreed that in the absence of any new direction, the meeting would be conducted under the rules and guidance previously pertaining to War Pensions Committees, coupled with the new VAPC Members handbook.

Item		Action
61	Declarations of Interest	
61.1	The Chairman tabled the Statutory Instrument and reminded members that should anything be discussed at the meeting which might constitute a conflict of interest between their personal life and VAPC business, they are required to declare such interest and take no part in the item concerned.	
61.2	There were no Declarations of Financial or Pecuniary Interest	
62	Confirmation of minutes	
62.1	The members confirmed the minutes of the meeting of 21 st May, previously circulated, were a true record and they were then signed by PK.	Focal Point to note

63	Matters Arising	
63.1	PK confirmed so far as item 51.2 was concerned the website was making progress but was still to be finalised.	
63.2	PK explained that in relation to item 59.4 DASA stats; information relating to the AFCS scheme is now to be produced every 6 months, next due in Sept – it is less clear when information in respect of the WPS would be provided. He had not seen the intended DASA consultation, which he had expected to include VAPC's as users of the stats.	
63.3	AW advised stats from DASA about pensioners in our area would be circulated with the minutes	AW
64	Chairman's report	
64.1	Circulated in advance of the meeting.	
64.2	PK explained that RF Bde HQ's have now been given an extra post, SO2 Transitions, to manage moving service leavers into civilian life. Support Command is working with VWS & VAPC's to produce the relevant job specification. JH suggested we would need to look at creating a formal link with the SO at 15 Bde, when established.	PK/AW
64.3	PK reported Chair of West of Scotland Committee is working on a draft memorandum of understanding (MOU) between VAPC's and VWS. The 2 nd draft will be sent round to members for information.	PK/AW
64.4	JP explained the current position at Norcross including management of WP & AFCS schemes under single Comd, success of in-house bid at recent market test and the transfer of WP scheme from HP delivery to CSC.	
64.5	Significant increase in workload - previous AFCS claimants were running at 450/500 pcm, but in late spring ran at 900pcm. In March 2012 across both schemes SPVA held 8500live cases awaiting decision. This week there are 13600 live cases, with 1300 not yet on the system and about 700 decisions waiting to go out. He has just been given permission to recruit staff to reduce the backlog, as well as to take on temporary staff for up to 48 weeks to tackle this surge in work.	
64.6	Agency is having to prioritise emergency cases (widows and inured servicemen on discharge). If committee considers there is a case which needs priority the details should be fed to the Focal Point.	ALL
64.7	With the AF Pension scheme a new contractor takes over wef 13 Nov, a company who provide most of the transitional items to American Armed Forces. They have been identifying easy improvements to save money & deliver better service to customers.	

64.8	AF Pension Credit historical problems have mostly been authorised for a solution, with only 4 hardship cases waiting for payment. The problem there has caused SPVA to look at getting the processes given to them working properly (i.e. working upstream), so as to reduce problems later, instead of having to solve the problems later (i.e. downstream), which is more expensive. To that end dedicated staff are helping in the design of AF Pension scheme 2015, which will be introduced on 1/4/2015	
64.9	The redundancy scheme seems to be working well, but will come under heavy pressure over the next few years. As a consequence Deputy Director of Veterans Services will be based in Glasgow to deal with any problems in the increasing pension burden.	
64.10	VWS & Helpline - SPVA have put more resources into VWS, as they appreciate the need for people in the field. As to the helpline they realised there was a problem, caused by illness & people leaving. As well as the baseline staff numbers an extra 6 people have been drafted in, so that waiting times have been lower in the last 3 to 4 weeks. It was acknowledged that at one time 30% of calls were not being answered.	
64.11	PS asked if the automated cut off could be stopped and was assured there was a new facility for messages; ring back and e-mail answers, where JP asked for feedback over the next few weeks from committee members as to how the helpline is performing. PS suggested revamping the FAQ's on the website could also help. JP pointed out if anyone noticed problems with the SPVA website they should be reported as the IT boffins would promptly act.	ALL
64.12	It is the intention that the Focal Point system will revert to the previous format and as well as Committees sending information inwards, SPVA will send out monthly information (subject to SPVA actually getting info).	ALL
64.13	PK raised the question of consultations not reaching SPVA, but instead sometimes being found by members of VAPC. JP will take away the examples given to raise with the chain of command so as to try to prevent the bottleneck somewhere in MOD (explanatory note – consultations by Government departments are sent to MOD for their consideration; MOD are responsible for making sure they are distributed to all relevant bodies for proper consultation).	JP
64.14	JP agreed VAPC's were 'in a funny place' and views were exchanged how the matter could be resolved. He indicated he would be happy to receive further suggestions.	
64.15	Resources – JP explained SPVA had achieved the savings required by MOD. There was nothing left to cut. Any further compulsory savings would inevitably result in a serious reduction in service as remaining options would inevitably entail a significant cut i.e. the Help Line or VWS.	

64.16	He explained that morale was good, despite all the pressure, shown by, for example, sickness level being reduced by 50% so people were happy coming to work.	
65	Welfare Services Report	
65.1	Circulated in advance of the meeting.	
65.2	AH explained the current IT position is that new DII machines issued last week caused such problems they have had to go back to the old system. Awaiting an IT expert looking into problem.	
65.3	The split in supervision is working from their point of view	
65.4	The VWALS person (Helen Wilkinson) is prepared to brief the Committee on this new organisation	For Dec Meeting AW/PK
66	Consultations	
66.1	Papers in relation to the consultations which had taken place or were current had been circulated in advance of the meeting.	
66.2	AFCS – no further comment	
66.3	ALSO –AH pointed out some ESA claimants whose entitlement ran out so they were not paid anything but stayed on it to get NI credit would not thus qualify for ALSO. Decision for each individual based on their personal circumstances. The loophole was currently being looked into.	
66.4	UC – AW explained the amendment to draft regulations highlighted by PS (see attached). PS also raised query about possible changes to Council Tax Benefit when UC comes in, pointing out work Committee had done to get disregard locally. JP asked that this not be raised on basis Treasurers mainly not aware of fact was voluntary and likely to continue with it under new scheme. Proper time to protest was if new scheme changed things. PK mentioned consultation on housing options not staffed to SPVA and he only knew of it after time for response was over!	ALL to examine final regs
66.5	PIP – Members have the chance to make representations	ALL
66.6	Mental Health Funding – PK explained still 7 days to put forward comments. JP commented SPVA had never seen the document until it appeared in our agenda papers. ACW asked to write representations on behalf of committee to be sent to secretary for onward transmission, as well as any he may care to make personally.	ACW
66.7	Pensions - Members have the chance to make representations	ALL

67	Community Covenants/Armed Forces Forums	
67.1	Papers in relation to the Forum Meetings which had taken place had been circulated in advance of the meeting.	
67.2	PK set out that uptake in NE was significantly above rest of country, only Redcar & Cleveland to sign in Nov.	
67.3	BDH reported variations with substance of uptake & fact key person seems to be military leads. Continual uphill struggle to make it clear who VAPC are and what we do.	
67.4	AW explained system had not included us from outset; now catching up; intention if allocation approved to have chair write to introduce members to LA & Mil member including what we could do (reference to internal document made).	PK
67.5	Allocations agreed as per draft. Intention is first named person primarily responsible for attendance at Forum. To liaise with 2 nd person to make sure all meetings covered. Only involve AW to get volunteer to be there if neither can attend. Seeking to secure long term working relationship. To help with that list of contacts handed out. Members asked to feed back to AW contacts at LA's & others at Forum to build list of contacts in each area.	ALL ALL
67.6	Directory of support for veterans in NE discussed and sent with these minutes. We need to look at expanding it with any other such contact we come across, so details of any to AW.	ALL
67.7	PK has vision for 2013 of meeting at LA location; briefing LA & 3 rd sector on VAPC, then holding our meeting so as to build on CC scheme.	PK/AW
67.8	AW will forward meeting dates to relevant members about meetings. Members are asked to make sure as soon as they know of new meeting date it is given to AW. If any point on an agenda causes a member to have concern they should raise with AW, PK or JH for advice.	AW ALL ALL
68	Community Engagement/Raising Awareness	
68.1	Papers in relation to Sunderland Airshow and Publicity had been circulated before the meeting.	
68.2	It was agreed raising awareness subcommittee ought to restart wef 01/13 and run under JH for 6 moths before he hands it over to run under new direction. Volunteers for the subcommittee are sought, AW to be advised asap.	JH
68.3	JP confirmed SPVA design/production people available to help.	JH/Subcom

68.4	Sunderland Airshow was discussed and JP confirmed support would be available. JCW will provide AW with RBL contact details to look to share location. Points – Location needs disabled access & to be co located with main service charities. Mobile unit may be in Scotland – booking needed (AH??). Use of TA Centre for parking/backup? Ask SBC if fact of CC means free provision of site? Possible provision of additional publicity materials pens/beer mats etc from SPVA	JCW/AW AH?? AW PS
69	Disabled Travel & Veterans	
69.1	The concerns of PS about disabled veterans and their entitlement to Railcards and bus passes had been circulated prior to the meeting, which he further explained to the meeting.	
69.2	Agreed to support PS in further pressure upon Nexus. PS & BH to take this forward.	PS & BH
69.3	Railcard is a national issue. PS explained the loop involved when trying to solve problem. JP took this on board and will raise in meeting he has in next 3 weeks. PS to forward (via AW) his previous papers re blue badge to go to JP in support of this argument.	PS & JP
70	Recruiting & Training	
70.1	PK - 4 members had joined us. Aspiration is one recruiting round each year can tell prospective applicants when that will take place.	PK
70.2	JP confirmed we may co-opt until next recruiting round and that lessons are being learned from the last round run by Defence Business Services. All asked to consider if know of any suitable new member & if so advise AW. In order to spread the influence of the Committee further members from some/all of the following are particularly sought – Resident in North Northumberland; medically qualified; SAAFA; Royal Navy & more females.	PK/ALL
71	SPVA & Focal Point	
71.1	The main points had been dealt with under report from JP, but it was agreed FP details would be added to renewed contact list and circulated.	AW
72	Committee	
72.1	There was discussion about the legal basis for the committees, where it was felt there must be a way forward which did not involve waiting until 2015. JWC will look at papers and make a further draft for JP to take forward.	JWC/JP

73	Any other business	
73.1	VG asked for clarification about restrictions on forwarding items sent to committee members, when bearing in mind any protective markings. Agreed it was for AW to establish position and Committee could freely distribute anything sent to them by Secretary, UNLESS told differently (such as contact list).	
73.2	AW confirmed he would be sending DASA data relating to each LA area.	AW
73.3	New members (&JWC) require application forms for VAPC ID cards as was not done at Norcross.	PK/AW
73.4	AW explained about possibility of new VAPC website coming on stream later this year and need to consider what info ought to be on there about committee. Discussion paper to follow, but meanwhile consent form distributed for members details to be published.	ALL
73.5	Business Cards – ALL members asked to e-mail AW with details of what name they want on business cards, which SPVA will then produce	ALL
73.6	SC asked JP if SPVA gave a routine acknowledgement to claimants when claim received. JP confirmed they did not; that the 40 wk average was from time claim registered on SPVA system (which could take 2/3 weeks to be logged) but that they routinely update claimants as to the position, often twice in the period until claim determined.	
73.7	PS asked who was data controller for NE VAPC – PK informed that committee members should hold little by way of personal data and that we are subject to the MOD data control regime (hence requirement for level 1 Data Protection training).	
74	2012 Meetings	
74.1	It was confirmed the next meeting would be on Monday 10 December, which would involve training, lunch and afternoon committee work. The location will be notified in due course	
74.2	There being no further business, the Chairman closed the meeting at 1311	