

Veterans Advisory Board: Minutes

Meeting: 16 November 2020, 14:00-16:00

Attendees -

Board Chair - Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP; Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Johnny Mercer MP; Andrew Anderson; Gary Ghale; Heledd Kendrick; JJ Chalmers; Leon Lloyd; Martin Lucas; Nick Knowles; Air Vice-Marshal The Hon David Murray CVO OBE; Nicky Murdoch MBE; Peter Mountford FCA; Dr Vanessa Moulton; Professor Sir Simon Wessely; David Richmond CBE, Office for Veterans’ Affairs.

In Attendance -

Charlie Wallace, Scottish Veterans’ Commissioner; Danny Kinahan, Northern Irish Veterans’ Commissioner; Dominic Forescue, Director General,Government Security Group & Government Chief Security Officer; Damian Paterson, Office for Veterans’ Affairs.

Apologies -

General Sir John McColl KCB CBE DSO, Office of Secretary of State for Wales Representative.

1. **Welcomes and Introductions**

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP welcomed the group and highlighted the Government’s cross cutting agenda on veterans, with the OVA at the centre ensuring all departments recognise that they have a role to play in representing the people who have done so much for us.

The importance of the Board was emphasised, and its role in ensuring the government has the right priorities to drive forward its vision to make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran.

It was noted that the Veteran’s Commissioner for Scotland and the Veterans’ Commissioner for Northern Ireland, and the Director General of the Government Security Group and the OVA - were attending the meeting in a listening capacity.

1. **Vision ‘to make the UK the best country in the world to be a veteran’**

David Richmond spoke on the Government’s commitment to ‘making the UK the best country in the world to be a veteran’ by 2028, through the 2018 ‘Strategy for Our Veterans’. He outlined that to achieve this vision we must work across government and the veteran sector; it will require a national effort.

4 work strands to achieve this Vision were proposed:

* Analyse the interface between government and the 3rd sector to better define our respective roles.
* Agree strategic planning assumptions for use across government and 3rd sector, which will enable greater alignment.
* Draft a rich description of what being the best country in the world to be a veteran means; what it looks and feels like from a veteran perspective and from the perspectives of key stakeholders; and the services and support it will require.
* Develop a dynamic delivery plan which will develop into the next iteration of the Strategy for our Veterans that will ensure that together we build on our respective strengths to realise our ambitious vision.

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans outlined this Government’s commitment to the veterans’ community, acknowledging that the UK has not seen through its duty to our veterans for some time.

He went on to acknowledge that this will involve the full ecosystem of veterans’ support, given the difficult times ahead and changing nature of support and care. To fully achieve the ‘vision’ we must ‘level up’ in the veterans’ space. The creation of this Veterans’ Advisory Board and the Office for Veterans’ Affairs are just some examples of this Government’s drive and commitment to veterans; he emphasised the need to seize the current political support to drive forward our work.

The Board were then invited to discuss the vision: to make the UK the best country in the world to be a veteran.

**The Board suggested that some of the key themes to consider when developing the ‘rich description’ of the vision were:**

* Consideration needs to be given to the definition of a veteran including an assessment of whether an individual who had served one day should be entitled to the same support as someone who had served for many years, or those who have been wounded.
* The training veterans receive while serving should prepare them to excel in civilian life. We need to understand why this isn’t always the case in order to be able to address it.
* Support should be focused on enabling veterans to grow and succeed in life. The emphasis should be on ‘circular funding’ where possible, which creates self-sustaining models of support that are not reliant on ongoing government support to survive.
* Creating stable home lives for veterans’, support for spouses and families need to be included in the statutory provision and entitlement for veterans.
* Engage with the community as much as possible on what support is available and ensure support is tailored to what veterans’ actually want and need. We must have a holistic, user centred, approach to policy making.
* Creating the environment for and incentivising improved charity collaboration will be a key enabler in providing better services, a clearer message on service provision to veterans and improving access to support.
* Ensuring consistency of delivery of MH services and support to veterans, wherever they live in the UK, will be a key factor in achieving the vision.
* Developing some form of ‘procurement set-aside’ programme for veteran owned businesses when bidding for Government contracts would show tangible support to veterans in business - following a similar US model.
* We should consider how we create the environment that allows veterans to continue to serve beyond their military service, in their communities, through volunteering or public service or paid employment. They can be great role models for society.

**Challenges raised by the Board:**

* That the ‘Vision’ was too broad; what do we want the UK to be the best in the world for? Is the vision about levelling up, or putting veterans’ at an advantage? How will we measure this?
* In developing future strategy iterations we must understand veteran expectations of the services provided for them and understand their perspectives.
* Defining in the ‘rich description’ where entitlements lie, where length of service plays into the support given.
* We talk about veterans as a homogenous group; they aren’t. They are a complex, diverse community with a substantial proportion over the age of 65 and a high number of elderly veterans are help-seekers. We need to make the UK the best country in the world to be a veteran for them all and not focus too hard on those of working age only or on those who shout loudest.
* We must understand the different needs of veterans across their demographic so that help, advice and support can be tailored to their specific needs.
* Providing those leaving the army with life skills will ensure they transition into civilian life more easily projecting a positive image of the Army and of veterans.
* The role of spouses and partners must be part of the policy making.
* Delivery of the strategy and the design and development of future iterations must be done ‘with’ the veterans’ community and not ‘to’ them. The way we communicate and engage with them will be critical enablers.
* The OVA must develop a clear understanding of the problems it’s trying to solve and will need to cut through some loud voices to do so. Gathering the data/ evidence that will expose ground truth will be essential work.

**Shorter term priorities identified:**

* Improving the Veterans’ Gateway, both in promotion so people know it exists, but also in increasing its functionality across the country, ensuring it has as much local support identified as possible. It could become a triage point for veterans seeking support.
* Communications with the veterans’ community must be improved. Too many are unaware of the support available to them or of the work being done on their behalf by the OVA, VAB and others. Communications must become more active and engaging. We should develop a timeline of key moments/ announcements that includes speeches in Parliament and elsewhere.
* Identifying a blend of progressing the longer term policy issues and “quicker wins”, areas we know have support for resolution.

**Longer term priorities:**

* Developing evidence through a gap analysis/map of support of what is currently available and where the problem lies. This would also need to take into consideration the needs of different communities and authorities across the UK. A heat map of need and accessibility of services.
* Can we ring-fence funding to ensure that contracts can be awarded to veteran run companies or high veteran employers?
* It will be important to improve perceptions of veterans by ‘talking up’ their skills, capabilities, experiences and value to employers and their communities.

1. **Challenging negative perceptions of veterans**

David Richmond introduced the paper, identifying that most veterans experience successful transitions on leaving the forces but there are a small proportion who do not; the media and public narrative tend to focus on these cases. There is also more that the government can do to promote the benefits that veterans bring to society, including the skills they have and their value to employers.

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans set out his ambition that we change the narrative, and reclaim the brand of veterans placing it in a positive light, ensuring the focus is on what veterans have to offer society and that veterans are not disadvantaged by their service. This work should be about levelling up support for veterans, recognising the large portion of them contribute significantly to the economy. While there are a smaller portion who require more support, the community is largely a positive one.

**Discussion of the causes of the negative perceptions in public discourse identified:**

* The minority, emotive story is easier to tell, and easier for the media to leverage than the many success stories that exist.
* The link between mental health and PTSD; the media latch on to all armed forces and veterans mental health issues being tied to PTSD which is not the case, and further causes public perception of service to be negative.
* MOD has historically taken a ‘he-psychology’ approach to comms, focused on stats and figures. Instead, we should add more emotion and storytelling to positive communications.
* If we don’t address the negative perceptions, the public could turn against veterans. Shifting the minority story from centre-stage is essential.
* Government is too slow to address issues that breed resentment in the veteran community and the wider public.

**The most damaging (or prevalent) negative perceptions for priority correction:**

* The public perceives that the military do not adapt well to civilian life and that veterans are damaged, need and receive lots of public money and resources.
* That military service and interaction with the Government can be politicised.
* We must build the veteran brand and the supporting narrative.
* Veterans should not be entitled to employment because of their service, but rather their skills from service should be acknowledged by employers as useful for their business. Building the brand will help this but we can start communicating more actively about it quickly.
* We should describe a full lifecycle of support from enlisting to leaving service and from there through a subsequent career to retirement and ultimately death. This supports recruiting and retention efforts as well as shifting veteran perceptions.

**Prioritisation between communicating with the veterans community about services and support available, and communicating with the general public to celebrate veterans in society:**

* Collaborate more closely with the charity sector and develop a framework to support closer working between them and government and the development of clear messages.
* Exploring ‘transition’ communications, bringing in the real experience of preparation for transitioning while in service and the benefits of a good transition to civilian life.

**Positive communication opportunities identified:**

* Military spouse stories are well liked by the media.
* Where possible Parliament and our social media channels should be used to champion positive news stories of veterans helping their communities.
* Work with local media on local good news stories, these can have a high impact on those with weak views on the armed forces and veterans.
* Focus on good role models.
* The reputation of the military overall is at a pretty high point of the country's history and there is a respect for and appreciation of the military's role in the COVID19 crisis in the past year. We should build on this.
* Proper recognition and the return of/ award of medals to veterans who had theirs historically refused or removed based on their sexuality, and improving rights and support for commonwealth veterans.

1. **Future meeting dates**

Future meetings have been scheduled for:

* Tuesday 16th February 2021, 10AM
* Tuesday 15th June 2021, 10AM
* Tuesday 19th October 2021, 10AM

Calendar holds have been sent for this, venues are to be decided, based on COVID19 restrictions.

1. **Next steps and immediate actions**

* **Board members** are asked to further consider whether the work programme laid out in the Vision paper and in section 2 of this readout is the right programme to deliver the Government’s vision.

CDL invited the Board to consider inviting individuals (officials, representatives of veterans’ groups, charities, academics, private sector organisations and internationals) to present or be questioned at future sessions.