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Veterans Advisory Board: Minutes

Meeting: 16 February 2021, 10:00-12:00

INTRODUCTION

Noting apologies from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove MP, the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Johnny Mercer MP, welcomed attendees and thanked Board members for their ongoing work.

HMG UPDATE

Director of the Office for Veterans’ Affairs, David Richmond announced his new appointment as Independent Veterans Advisor to the Government, noting that he would step down from his current role when his successor was appointed. He presented an update on major veterans’ activities in Government since the previous Board meeting in November. This included:

1. The Armed Forces Bill being introduced to the House of Commons. Subject to approval, this will include enshrining the Armed Forces Covenant into law.
2. That morning, the Government published a policy for LGBT veterans to apply for the return of medals that had been forfeit for reasons associated with their sexuality. The policy was noted as an important step in addressing historic treatment of the LGBT veterans’ community.
3. The Overseas Operation Bill passed through the House of Commons to the House of Lords. The Minister for Defence People and Veterans reiterated that the Bill does not prevent investigation for criminal behaviour, but will instead introduce a presumption not to prosecute unless doing so would clearly be in the public interest. The Board discussed the importance of finding a way forward for Northern Ireland
4. The OVA commissioned a COVID-19 study from King’s College London. The initial results were published in late 2020 and these highlighted that 60% of veterans had been volunteering in their community.
5. The first annual report on progress made on delivering the Strategy Action Plan was published in December as part of the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report.

AREAS OF DISCUSSION

The board was briefed on the role of the Defence National Rehabilitation Centre (DNRC) in supporting a small cohort of veterans with specific rehabilitative needs. The potential for increasing the capacity of the DNRC to serve a broader range of veterans was discussed.

Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Johnny Mercer, outlined the investment into Veterans UK being made by this Government. The Board discussed issues with processing delays being raised by veterans and welcomed planned improvements to current systems.

The board was also briefed on issues relating to War Widows and to foreign and commonwealth veterans seeking to settle in the UK. The board asked to be kept updated on these issues and the Minister for Defence People and Veterans agreed that this was important.

Members of the board gave views on the utility of the Veterans Gateway, currently part funded by Government. The board was supportive of the Gateway, but felt it could provide a more comprehensive service. They welcomed the Gateway’s commitment to further develop its services and considered means of best utilising existing HMG funding to improve the service.

Finally the board was presented with plans to best develop an overarching set of metrics to measure the performance of the Veterans Strategy and the outcomes identified in it. Board members, who had a range of related expertise in data collection and analysis, advised how best to ensure the effectiveness of this work, including the need to ensure compatibility of data for cross analysis between the England & Wales census and those carried out in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans thanked all present for their time and input and advised that the next meeting would be held in June 2021.