



Soldier On Headquarters
Building 1, 44 Bellenden Street
CRACE, ACT 2911
1300 620 380
ABN: 248 117 60786

**The Productivity Commission
Inquiry into the Compensation and Rehabilitation of Veterans
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City
ACT 2601 Australia**

Dear Commissioner,

On behalf of Soldier On, I thank you for the opportunity to provide the enclosed response to the Inquiry into Compensation and Rehabilitation for Veterans.

Soldier On was founded in 2012, to provide support and services to contemporary veterans and to bring the need for greater support for contemporary veterans to the awareness of the wider community. Since our inception, we have grown dramatically and have matured into a professional service delivery organisation focused on supporting the men and women, and their families, who have served our nation.

Soldier On has a number of comments and recommendations based on the draft report which we hope are considered in the final report.

We welcome any opportunity to discuss further with the Commission.


John Bale
Deputy Chair & Co-Founder
SOLDIER ON

Enclosed:

1. Soldier On Response To Productivity Commission Report Into The Department Of Veterans Affairs

RESPONSE TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION REPORT INTO THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS – OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL COMMENTS

The Productivity Commission was requested by the then Treasurer of Australia, Hon Scott Morrison MP to complete an inquiry into the system of compensation and rehabilitation for veterans (Serving and Ex-serving Australian Defence Force members). The Productivity Commission Draft Report was released in December 2018. Soldier On has a number of comments and recommendations based on the draft report which we hope are considered in the final report.

Soldier On supports a number of the broad findings and general theme of the report. As an organisation that provides a range of services and support for current and ex-serving members of the Australian Defence Force, we have strongly advocated for the following observations of the report:

'The veteran support system is, and must be, about more than compensation and rehabilitation.'

'It must take a lifetime approach to supporting veterans and their families and be more focused on wellness and ability (not illness and disability) and minimising harm from service.'

'It needs to be more responsive to the changing needs and circumstances of veterans, which will require more flexibility and adaptability in supports and in the way services are provided.'

In making our own observations on the proposed structural changes within the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) and the Department of Defence (Defence), it is important to recognise two points. Firstly, the DVA and its veteran centric reform have created better outcomes for veterans, and specifically improved the support provided for younger veterans. Secondly, the DVA offers support that is often envied by other countries, including our closest Allies. Domestic organisations that support the other arms of Australia's National Security apparatus also do not have a DVA equivalent and do not have the suite of services that are currently offered and continue to grow within Defence. The suggestions we make below, which we believe align with the spirit of the Productivity Commission recommendations, are to see improvements to the current system, not its destruction.

While Soldier On is considered by many as an Ex-Service Organisation (ESO), we would rather be known as a Veteran Support Organisation (VSO) as our services are provided to current and ex-serving members. The report highlights that ESOs *'play an important role in delivering services to veterans, including advocacy services to help veterans through the claims process, transition support and employment services. They will continue to play a vital role providing peer support for veterans and their families and improving social integration as veterans transition from the defence force.'* The report then goes on to highlight that *'However, there are numerous ESOs, and the group as a whole lacks coordination.'* We strongly support both points. ESO/VSOs do not coordinate or collaborate well. They are a disparate group that provide a wide range of programs and services that often

focus on different demographics within the veteran community. There is no question that ESO/VSOs must work better together and leadership in this space must be established to see community based organisations set collective policy, share resources and reduce duplication.

The Draft also states that *'There appears to be no strategic vision by DVA as to how to leverage the expertise of ESOs. As a result, ESOs may not be as effective as they could be.'* While Soldier On concurs with this comment, we believe that this report does not consider the full capability of the ESO community to address the issues that are facing veterans and their families. Instead of being consulted as an afterthought, or considered only for their membership reach, ESO/VSOs should be core to the delivery of services identified within the draft report. This is not asking the Government to abrogate its responsibilities to the not-for-profit sector, but to see it as a cost effective, community driven resource to achieve better outcomes. Strongly governed, evidenced based and best practice ESO/VSOs can provide many of the transition, employment, education, mental health support, case-coordination, advocacy, counselling, social connection, family support and work place training of mental health literacy and de-stigmatisation programs that are considered in the Draft.

Soldier On hopes that in the final report ESO/VSOs are considered as a core contributor to the system that supports rehabilitation, transition and wellbeing of veterans and their families. In order to fully realise the potential of the ESO/VSO sector, all organisations need to unify their purpose, while those organisations that prove themselves to deliver high quality services should be considered a key part of the delivery system. Building a system that grants/contracts work to a group of likeminded, well governed and coordinated service delivery VSOs to deliver solutions for many of the issues identified within the report, would be both cost effective and further connect the Australian community with its veteran population, while improving collaboration of ESO/VSOs.

Soldier On believes that ensuring the availability of medical support for rehabilitation and timely compensation to veterans are the core responsibilities of the DVA. Placing more and more disparate services on top of these core aims often inhibits best practice and can often create inter-Departmental conflicts-of-interest and confusion. Furthermore, each new initiative/service that is requested of DVA does not meet an organisation, that by its nature, is not very flexible or adaptable to change. Soldier On strongly recommends that ESO/VSOs should be considered to provide many of the services mentioned in the Draft as a cost-effective part of the overall veterans' support system, allowing DVA or the proposed VCS to focus on these core capabilities. A secondary effect of this approach is that the lack of co-ordination and collaboration within the ESO/VSO community would be improved by letting individual or groups of ESO/VSOs to deliver services through issues grants or contracts.

MAIN POINTS WE SUPPORT:

We agree with the broad statements made by the Draft report on the state of compensation and rehabilitation for veterans. Italics have been added to highlight where we believe the intent needs change. With these slight modifications we therefore agree that the current system is:

- not working in the *best* interest of veterans and their families or the Australian community.

- Not *fully* meeting the needs of contemporary veterans and will struggle to meet the needs of future generations of veterans.
- needs to be brought more in line with contemporary workers' compensation schemes and modern person-centered approaches to rehabilitation, health care and disability support.
- needs to place veterans and *their families* at the heart of the system and take a more holistic, flexible and individualised approach to supporting them.
- needs new governance and administrative systems best suited to meeting the future challenges and emerging needs of veterans while operating in a modern, efficient and effective way.

The proposed veteran support ecosystem. We do not agree with the proposed change to the mission of the ADF. We believe that the ADF should not be required to support ex-serving personnel directly. We propose that external organisations, distinguished from the DVA should be responsible for the support of ex-serving personnel, transitioning personnel and some coordinated support to current personnel.

The proposed change to the mission of the ADF also suggests that it is responsible to 'provide support to current (personnel).' We propose that the current mission of the ADF, which is to 'protect Australia's national interests,' has the 'support of the ADF's current personnel' at its core. The ADF cannot meet its mission if it fails to support its current serving personnel.

With this in mind, we therefore disagree with the placement of the proposed Veterans Policy Group (VPG) and Joint Transition Command (JTC) within Defence. We do however, support the Veterans Services Commission (VSC) and its aims along with its separation from the ADF/DVA.

Overall, we support the establishment of these entities or the intent behind them but disagree with their placement within the proposed architecture, besides the VSC. We also believe that service delivery VSOs can provide many of the programs and services required in a cost effective, adaptive and innovative manner.

We further discuss the proposed JTC, VSC and VPG below.

Joint Transition Command (JTC). We believe that effective and tailored transition is critical, however, it is not best placed within the Department of Defence. While we do not argue that the ADF has a responsibility to ensure transition is completed well, it should not be overseen and managed solely by the ADF. The Veteran Services Commission, along with a trusted network of service delivery VSOs can provide the services to ensure that current and ex-serving members are given the various support they need that falls outside of the duties required of the ADF.

These services must be managed by community-based organisations who can provide a far more personalised service that has lived experience. Organisations like Joint Health Command (JHC) and Defence Community Organisation (DCO) already have critical roles to play for *current* serving members and their families.

Community-based organisations who are more agile, not burdened by bureaucracy, and have greater penetration across the community are better placed to support ex-serving personnel and those that are transitioning or need further connection to the community while still serving.



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Also, Government organisations are traditionally poor at providing transition support to those moving outside of the Government.

For example, Soldier On has placed considerable resources into the establishment of an employment and education program that is linked to its social connection, mental health support and case management services. Soldier On currently has over 140 companies that have signed up to work with us in a program that has seen hundreds of veterans and their families placed in meaningful roles and the business community educated as to what a veteran can bring to a work force. These connections along with trained employment staff across Australia operating from Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne, Newcastle, Adelaide, Perth and Albury provide personal support to veterans and their families as they build up a transition plan and embark on a new career. Importantly, this plan will focus not just on employment but also on potential education requirements, social connections outside of Defence and mental health support through what can be a difficult period. Through a greater level of DVA support, these services could be scaled to meet the wider range of transition requirements. Soldier On could work with other community organisations to be a key component of veteran wellbeing and ongoing support.

While the report notes that the new JTC could work with some ESO/VSOs, the consideration is secondary in nature. Again, it is proposed that Soldier On (and other ESO/VSOs) could scale its current suite of transition and holistic support services to meet the need identified within this Draft instead of funding a new Command within Defence. This would be far more cost effective and would build on highly successful programs that are in practice, are veteran focused and have measured success. By virtue of being a Government/Not-For-Profit (NFP) partnership, the primary performance indicators for Soldier On and other NFPs would be the transition needs of the veteran and their families being best met, rather than any commercial outcomes.

It is important to remember that transition out of the military is not simply about obtaining a job or building an improved knowledge of personal finance. Transition also includes building a new sense of being in a work place that is often foreign and has a number of preconceptions about veterans. It includes developing new social connections within the general community, striking a work-life balance in a new professional environment and translating military skills and attributes to civilian ones just to name a few. This again is not best suited to being conducted within the ADF but instead by organisations that reside in and represent the community.

While there is no question that the ADF as an institution has a moral obligation to provide transition support, this support should not be provided in-house for the points identified above.

Veteran Services Commission. Soldier On supports the general concept of the VSC as an organisation that is based on contemporary workers compensation principles. In order to make full comment on the VSC, further details are required on its governance, scope and the exact benchmark of 'contemporary works compensation'. However, the concept of a focus of compensation for the Commission is supported.

Veteran Policy Group. Soldier On believes that this organisation should not be within the ADF. To influence both the ADF, and also DVA/VCS, it is important to be independent of both. Ideally this Group would build policy, frameworks and develop co-ordination between the ADF, DVA/VCR

and ESO/VSOs. In effect this Group takes on the thought leadership for all veterans' issues. This should not only include this generation of veterans' issues but also the next.

The VPG should also be driven by both an evidence base that currently exists, along with continued research and development of programs and quality assurance of both programs provided within Defence and by selected VSO service delivery partners. Organisations like Phoenix Australia should be a core component of any VPG to ensure a link between policy and emerging and established evidence.

We support the Draft report view that there have been *'reviews and more reviews, but still little strategic policy.'* The VPG will be a critical enabler of stronger policy.. Soldier On strongly believes that this must sit outside both the ADF or DVA/VCS. It can act as an organisation that ensures a framework that brings these two Departments, along with VSOs into a broader system of support. It can help to deliver a comprehensive blueprint and high-quality services to support veterans and their families for this generation and the next.

CONCLUSION

The Draft Productivity Commissions report into the state of veteran support highlights a number of areas that require systematic improvement. Soldier On concurs with the intent of the report but makes the overall comment that the new entities created, mainly the VPG and JTC, are not best placed within the Department of Defence. Furthermore, VSOs who can provide high quality services, matched with a considerable platform to do so, are not considered fully in the Draft reports proposed system of support. Having these organisations, and indeed this sector, as core to veteran support will help provide a more seamless link between the ADF, DVA/VCS and the community. Soldier On is not suggesting that Government abrogates its responsibilities and places an unachievable burden on predominately self-funded community organisations. Instead, we propose that many of our current services are scaled by funding that would be utilised to establish the JTC, parts of the VPG and other programs within Government.

Having community organisations who will focus on individual goals, not economic gain, while meeting strict Commonwealth governance standards can achieve the service aims of the Draft report. A secondary effect of this proposal is it will further professionalise the ESO/VSO sector. These organisations are also best placed to be innovative and responsive to the demographic shift that is occurring between veterans and 'contemporary veterans'.

Soldier On looks forward to supporting the Commission with any of the recommendations we have made, as well as supporting veterans in both the current and proposed system.