

**Cross-Party Group in the Scottish Parliament on
The Armed Forces and Veterans Community**

Notes from a meeting 8 July 2020

16:00hrs by Microsoft Teams

1. Introductions and Opening Remarks Convenor
 - a. The meeting was attended by Maurice Corry MSP and Bill Bowman MSP. It was agreed that, as this was a continuation of the 4 June meeting, that the group remained quorate. 20 non-MSP members attended this part of the meeting.
 - b. Apologies received from Edward Mountain MSP and Gordon Lindhurst MSP
 - c. Minutes of previous meeting: It had been agreed that the minutes of the previous meeting, 14 Jan 20, would be circulated for approval; they were approved. Notes from the previous part of this virtual meeting (4 June) had been circulated.
2. The Main Topic for this evening, as for the previous one, is a focus on Covid-19 and its impact on organisations. A report had been commissioned by Cobseo into this, and Veterans Scotland had sought a report into the impact of Covid-19 on the organisations that are members of Veterans Scotland.
3. Two brief examples of how charities have adapted to the changing situation had been provided; the Secretary highlighted the key areas contained in them:
 - a. **Veterans Foundation:** The Veterans' Foundation has released funds to meet pandemic-related challenges, agreed at short-notice. Beneficiaries have included Scottish charities or charities with a base in Scotland.

As examples, applications for grants have been received for the following needs:

- Helping communication (eg with telephones and tablet) between vulnerable people and the charities
- Providing a vehicle with which to distribute food and other goods to the vulnerable
- Helping fund an employee to carry out pandemic-related activity
- Enabling online activities for veterans and other armed forces groups to be funded during the lockdown, eg acting, art, fitness
- Funding online mental health support for veterans

Funds continue to flow in to the Veterans' Foundation, with no reduction during the pandemic, and by the end of Jun we will have given away over £3.5M to about 240 organisations.

- b. **RAFBF:** The RAFBF have changed many of their support services during the last few months to adapt to their potential beneficiary's needs and have streamlined their application process so accessing funding is easier.

Examples of their revised support include:

- Increased number of Crisis or Temporary Financial Assistance Grants available for the RAF Family including working-age RAF veterans who may be out of work due to the crisis. This is in addition to on-going support for older veterans.
- Introduced a new online application form to make applying for immediate financial help quicker and easier.
- Weekly 'Check and Chat' calls for the veterans' community.
- Facilitating letters from children of RAF personnel to encourage isolated veterans during this time.
- Taking referrals from the public to direct support for isolated veterans.
- Expanded Telephone Friendship Groups for more veterans to join.
- Expanded Listening and Counselling Service, including the addition of a 24-hour emotional support helpline.
- Free access to mindfulness app Headspace to provide preventative mental health support.
- Access to an online wellbeing zone for the RAF Family.
- A Legal/Employment Advice Helpline for those facing challenges in this area from May 2020.

These are just a few examples and there is a comprehensive list of other support that is available in the 'Guide to our Services' booklet which is available on our website – www.rafbf.org.uk

The consensus of the meeting was that most charities had adapted their processes in similar ways.

4. The Secretary highlighted the key findings from the FiMT report into the impact of Covid-19 on charities. He stressed that this is a snapshot of the opinions from VS member charities at the end of May and that it was intended to carry out a further review in September. It should be noted that the figures represent the % of charities reporting a change rather than % increase/reduction in individual requests or grants.

a. Health: Slight increase for Drug and Alcohol support (9% in Scotland 17.6% pan-UK), 91% of respondents in Scotland indicated no change). It was noted that it was becoming increasingly difficult to connect with those needing support.

Scotland had seen a 38% increase in demand for Physical Health related support with 60% reporting no significant change. Those that identify an increase gave identified greater complexity and cost.

Mental Health Scotland identified 56% decrease in demand for MH support (56% pan-UK) with 6% (9% UK) reporting increased demand; 37% of respondents reported no change in demand.

Demand for support for Loneliness has increased by 75% in Scotland and 65% pan-UK; 25% report no change

36% of respondents indicated an increase in demand for support relating to domestic abuse in Scotland; 64% reported no change.

Since the previous part of the meeting, it had been identified that low level mental health issues were anticipated to become more prevalent; this had been identified by RAFBF, by WWTW and by Thistle Foundation. It is likely that those in, or close to, poverty were most susceptible to mental health issues.

- b. Housing:** 35% of respondents identify an increase in demand in Scotland; 8% identify a reduction in demand in Scotland. 57% identified no change. The complexities of providing rental accommodation, such as showing potential tenants the property has reduced demand during restrictions, but many Housing charities anticipate an increase in demand after opening up.
- c. Education:** There has been some increase in demand for training grants to assist in preparation for employment. Initially a large number of enquiries, in particular around exams, how schools and FE/HE would work, but these appear to be reducing as more information is made available. Education courses for those in Transition have been affected but are now being conducted on-line as far as possible.
- d. Employment:** This seems to be fairly consistent across the board, with 14% reporting a reduction in demand; 38% reporting an increase and 48% reporting no significant change.
- e. Demands on Funding:** The majority of charities, 56% of VS members responding to the survey, report that they are coping OK with the level of demand on their services; 34% report that they are being challenged, with 9% reporting that they are being very significantly challenged.
 - a. 71% of charities in VS reported an increase in demand from those in poverty and requiring financial support, 25% reported no change with 4% reporting a decrease.
 - b. 44% of VS indicated that they have furloughing staff.
 - c. 40% of organisations report that they anticipate a reduction in services in the next 12 months; 12% are already experiencing it.

f. Charity Finances: Most (66%) of the charities had reported a decrease in income, with some (13%) reporting an increase and 22% not seeing a change. Where income was reduced this was due to cancellations of fundraising events, reduction in public donations, reduced trading income and a fall in investment income. On expenditure, 53% reported a reduction in expenditure, 28% an increase and 19% no change. Looking forward, some 25% are already using their reserves and anticipate these being significantly depleted over the next 12 months. A third recognise the risk that their financial stability could be compromised over the next 12 months, with a small number (15%) anticipating having to sell assets over the next 12 months to raise funds (or have already done so). Some 12% of charities have identified a risk of closure, and 21% recognise the need for greater collaboration and possible merger with other charities over the next 2 years.

It was stressed that this was a snapshot of opinion, taken at an early stage of the pandemic; a further review will take place in September.

g. Open Forum During the subsequent discussions:

- the resilience of many veterans was noted.
- There was some discussion about how much of the impact of Covid-19 was a 'veterans' issue' and how much was a 'people's issue'.
- The work of a range of organisations was considered and their speed, agility and flexibility was commended.
- It was noted that there is a risk of increased poverty in due course.
- The adverse impact of social distancing on mental health was noted
- There were many examples of great resilience demonstrated by schools and Early years Learning Centres with teaching staff working well with parents.
- There is a high probability of a 'bow-wave' of increased demand for support in three to four months' time as lockdown is eased.
- Many services, such as SDS, have adapted well to meet the prevailing conditions
- The importance of effective collaboration between organisations was noted.

The Convenor thanked everyone for their input.

h. Dates of Future Meetings:

- The next formal meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 16 September 2020 (Amended from 15 Sep)
- It was suggested that this was a very useful forum for exchange of information and that a further meeting could be held in 2 months' time, with a different attendance.