

## **CPG on Building Bridges with Israel**

Richard Lyle MSP (RL), Maurice Corry MSP (MC), Mary Fee MSP (MF)

Total attendees - 20

### **AGM**

Mary Fee nominated RL as convener, seconded by MC

Richard reviewed last meetings minutes - no comments, minutes approved

## **Sean Colvin (SC) from Veterans Scotland presenting**

Sean presentation on Beit HaLochem & The Veteran Games and conference which took place in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

The themes that came out were:

- British veterans participating, and families being part of the event
- Sense of belonging through sport and participation
- Focus on healing PTSD, physical and mental conditions, via physical therapy and sport

SC played a video of the Veteran Games/Conference and the journey of the British delegation to Israel.

- Focus of veteran games in Israel is families and focus on veterans bringing families
- Trip was non stop with a packed itinerary
- Tour was led by Israel Experience
- IE guide was also a veteran and was struck by experience

Sean spoke about Beit Halochem -

- TA, Haifa, JLM, Beer Sheva - currently have BH rehabilitation centre, plus one being built in Ashdod.
- In UK there is one main centre, which is in England. Vets who do travel there are unlikely to go with family due to distance/accessibility.
- The games were inspirational - participants did cross fit, swimming, and more
- The UK participants worked with Israeli veterans, created an environment of comradery
- UK and Israeli vets connection was amazing, many things in common

- Family: the children learned about parents suffering and struggle [quotes from one family], 'as a family we have had little help'. Difficulty of gaining access to mental health support, particularly while managing work. They said the veteran games were the only instance of family wide support.
- "Our memories of this beautiful country are filled with much needed time with dad" - participant quote
- Highest decorated Royal Marine 'you don't get these awards without loss of life'
- Competitions/games took place every morning
- Afternoon was tours and cultural activities - tours, museums, etc: coordinated with Israeli counterparts
- Service held at British war memorial in Ramleh
- Visit to the Israeli National cemetery at Mt Hertzal
- SC felt more inspired by families than the games themselves

### **Scottish Veterans Health research group - Dr Beverley Bergman, University of Glasgow**

- Research on comparison of health - did military service influence health, and if so what factors influenced
- Findings complex.
- Increased risk of mental health problems. Risk is higher for those with shorter service/decreases with length of service
- Smoking related disease bigger problem than mental health
- Smoking as bonding - sharing a packet of cigarettes
- Lifetime consequences of military service
- Academic conference ran in parallel with games
- Co chaired by Professor Simon Wesley - Kings/London
- Israeli side - professor Zehava Solomon from TLV university.
- First day - session on needs of vets and innovative treatment approaches. Spectrum of health issues and comparisons between both countries.
- Israel has 51,000 wounded veterans
- UK has 14,000
- In the UK general view is that vets are put on a pedestal. People often don't understand veterans and issues they face
- Perception that veterans are 'mad sad or bad'
- In Israel every family has veterans so they tend to be better understood, though issues are similar

- Bond that had developed between the veterans and families was transformational
- The importance of being around like minded people, and be around wounded vets, to interact with people for whom they don't have to pretend. Importance of having a shared bond and shared experience.
- Beit Halochem - means "home of the warrior"
- BH wide range of facilities, and gives a space to meet with like minded vets.
- Geographically easier in Israel as its smaller
- Moving from being in a very strict and structured environment to being in every day society which is less structured - disciplined - has it's challenges
- The old model isn't meeting the needs of younger people
- We desperately need a place where vets can be ex soldiers
- Participants felt that they saw the real Israel, big picture, not just small incidents of violence or headlines. Felt very welcomed and comfortable

Sean Colvin

- Conclusion - this is about learning from one another and learning from different cultures
- BH is not funded by the state - funded by members and fundraising
- We have a lot to learn and a lot to share
- Call to action - what can we do in order to do another trip, bring more Scottish vets to see what happens in Israel?

MC- already being discussed

Q&A

1. EG noted that there is a group in the South that brings Israeli soldiers to the UK, but they don't bring families. They are hosted by families. EG to give MC details of group.

2. MC - what are the centres like?

S - like a fancy gym, with clinical centre attached.

- focus is less on going for treatment; the kids can use the centre while treatment is being given to the veteran

- You're not a victim going to a hospital to be treated

3. RL - smoking? Still smoking in barracks?

B - smoking has been banned on military premises since 2006. However there is still a strong smoking culture, partially due to boredom. Stats show smoking is around twice as much in army than civilian life.

4. Point raised from attendee - approach of including family/holistic. It's often not acknowledged that family are part of managing crisis. The responsibility is falling more and more onto the third sector. Came across a woman who felt she had failed as a wife as she was unable to support her husband.

5. It seems people are realising that family needs to be part of process, while also giving space for soldiers to be around soldiers

B - 'squaddie humour' is often very helpful, though outsiders may find it difficult to understand  
- Family role is often 24/7

6. Ruth Kennedy - What was different for families in Israel, was there also support available for families?

S - the whole families become members of the centre, so services are available for all of them, crèches for children, a space to talk about experiences.

- a little known stat is that many marriages break up two years post transition

B - a lot of the veterans cope well while they're serving, but fall apart two years later... because they have lost their friends, sense of belonging. The loss of friends etc impacts families too.

7. MC - what stood out more than anything else?

S - they understand. There's no barrier to understanding what service personnel have gone through as more people have done military service. In Israel service is closer to home, and in the UK deployment tends to be overseas.

Israelis understand what military service is, so there's a better understanding of needs. Less charities set up - as they have a few large core charities such as Natal and Beit Halochem.

RL thanked presenters.

Next CPG is December 11th.

