

27 April 2025

Mr Michael von Berg MC OAM
President and Chair
Alliance of Defence Service Organisations
president@adso.org.au

Dear Mr von Berg,

Thank you for your correspondence of 21 March 2025. I am pleased to provide this response outlining the Albanese Government's achievements and future priorities in support of Australia's defence personnel, veterans and their families.

National Advocacy Peak Body

In its response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (RCDVS), the Albanese Government agreed-in-principle to Recommendation 89 with respect to a national peak body for ex-service organisations (ESOs). As part of its response to the RCDVS, the Government has provided \$4.5 million to the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) to undertake consultation on transition and wellbeing supports, including the co-design of a new agency focussed on wellbeing within the Department, and to continue to consult with ESOs on the development of a national peak body.

The Government also welcomes the establishment of the Institute of Veterans' Advocates as a national professional association, addressing concerns raised by the veteran community regarding a lack of standards and professional oversight. The Institute will establish competency standards, a code of ethics and minimum training requirements for veteran advocates as well as accrediting veteran advocacy service providers and monitoring compliance with continuing professional development. This will enhance the overall standard of advocacy services nationally, improve confidence and provide assurance to veterans and their families that services provided from an accredited veterans' advocate are professional, high quality and are provisioned with a contemporary understanding of veteran entitlements.

As you know, the National Consultation Framework (NCF) facilitates communication between the veteran and ex-service community, the Repatriation and Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commissions, government and DVA. It comprises national, state and territory forums that consider matters of importance to the veteran community, make recommendations for change and provide a voice to those that might not be otherwise heard. The NCF is formally reviewed every three years to assess its effectiveness and

relevance. A review commenced in 2024 and aligns with several recommendations of the RCDVS. Further review of the NCF will be undertaken following the consultation and co-design activities. An interim report will be released in 2025, with further outcomes of the review expected to be released later this year after the consultation on the RCDVS recommendations is complete.

As part of the consultation process in 2023 for veterans' legislation simplification and harmonisation, the Albanese Government sought the views of the veteran community on the establishment of a Ministerial Advisory Council that would provide advice direct to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. This would be in addition to the NCF and implement Recommendation 11.4 of the Productivity Commission's Inquiry Report, *A Better Way to Support Veterans*. The establishment of the Council will be progressed this year.

Grants in Aid (GIA) Program

As you are aware, the GIA Program aims to support national ESOs to provide coordinating and representational support for the veteran and defence community. The program has had a funding allocation of \$145,000 per annum since 2000-01, with national ESOs raising concerns that this level of funding has not kept pace with inflation and rising costs. The RCDVS also recognised the need to enhance connection and collaboration across ESOs. On 27 March 2025, I wrote to all eligible ESOs to advise that for the 2025-26 round the maximum grant funding available for each eligible organisation would be increased from \$10,000 to \$25,000. The additional funding recognises the additional workload taken on by ESOs as a result of the RCDVS and will support them to undertake coordination and representational activities as part of the implementation of RCDVS recommendations.

Response to the Royal Commission in Defence and Veteran Suicide

More broadly, the Albanese Government accepted the overwhelming majority of the RCDVS's 122 recommendations: agreeing or agreeing-in-principle to 104 recommendations, noting 17 recommendations for further consideration, and with one recommendation not supported in part. Implementing this response will result in the most comprehensive reform ever undertaken to the culture, systems and processes across Defence, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and DVA to prevent suicide and improve the mental health and wellbeing of serving personnel and veterans.

Since releasing its response, and in addition to the provision of \$4.5 million to DVA to support consultation, the Albanese Government has:

- established a new cross-agency Taskforce within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to provide advice by 30 June 2025 on the implementation detail of the Government response, including recommendations that were referred to the Taskforce in the response for further consideration and advice;
- appointed an Interim Head of the Defence and Veterans' Service Commission (DVSC), the independent statutory body that will oversee enduring and systemic reform across the whole Defence ecosystem; and

- enshrined the DVSC in legislation with effect by 30 September 2025.

Military Superannuation

In February 2025, the Albanese Government supported the establishment of a Senate inquiry into the operation and appropriateness of the superannuation and pension schemes for current and former members of the ADF. This comprehensive inquiry is due to report by August and will examine and provide recommendations on a range of matters, which a re-elected Albanese Government will carefully consider. I encourage your member organisations to engage closely with the inquiry. The terms of reference for the inquiry are available at:

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administration/ADFSuperannuationPension/Terms_of_Reference.

Office of the Special Investigator (OSI) and war crime allegations

I note the matters you have raised with respect to the work of the OSI. As you would be aware, the OSI is independent and its work happens at arms-length from the government of the day, which is appropriate. Consistent with the approach of past governments, the Albanese Government is committed to respecting the independence of the OSI and its work. Any investigations pursued by the OSI are a matter for that body. I also note that the Rome Statute was ratified by the Howard Government in 2002 and, since that time, successive Australian governments have respected and affirmed the independence of the International Criminal Court and its important role in upholding international law.

Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (IGADF)

As noted above, the Albanese Government released its response to the Final Report of the RCDVS in December 2024. Of the 13 recommendations in Chapter 12, the Government agreed to 12 and noted one. The Government also stated that all recommendations relating to the IGADF will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the *Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force*.

Veteran compensation, rehabilitation and entitlements

In response to the Interim Report of the RCDVS, the Albanese Government took swift and meaningful action on all of its recommendations, including with respect to simplifying and harmonising veteran compensation and rehabilitation legislation. A vital part of ensuring we got this change right was making sure it met the needs of the veteran community, which is why we undertook three rounds of public consultation on the proposed legislation from 2022 to 2024. Submissions helped the Government to respond to the issues that were of most concern to veterans. In February, the *Veterans' Entitlements, Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Act 2025* was passed by Parliament. This means that from 1 July 2026, all compensation and rehabilitation claims will be determined under a single Act – the improved *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004*.

Veteran White Cards

As you know, Recommendation 90(b) of the RCDVS Final Report stated that the Australian Government should extend non-liability health care for mental health conditions to all reserve personnel. In its response, the Albanese Government agreed-in-principle to further expanding non-liability health care for mental health conditions to all reserve personnel. This is being considered by the Royal Commission Implementation Taskforce, which will provide further advice to the government of the day on the implementation of all recommendations by 30 June 2025.

Defence Honours and Awards

As you are aware, in 2023 the Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal conducted an Inquiry into Medallion Recognition for Service in Rifle Company Butterworth (RCB). The Tribunal's report made 10 recommendations, including that service with RCB during the period 1970 to 1989 should be determined as 'non-warlike' service under the *Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986*, and that consideration be given to affording the same medallion recognition and veterans entitlements to Royal Australian Air Force personnel who performed similar duties and were subject to the same or comparable risks as RCB veterans. Given the number and nature of Tribunal's recommendations, the Government is undertaking work to give full consideration to each of the 10 recommendations so that they can be appropriately responded to.

As you are also aware, the Albanese Government is committed to ensuring that the Defence Honours and Awards system, including the independent Tribunal, meets modern requirements. A re-elected Albanese Government will continue this work. The Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee is also currently undertaking a comprehensive inquiry into the integrity and efficacy of the Defence honours and awards system. The Committee is due to report by 12 June 2025 and any recommendations would be considered carefully by a re-elected Albanese Government. The terms of reference for the inquiry can be found at:

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/DefenceHonours47/Terms_of_Reference.

Afghanistan veterans

As you would be aware, Defence's Directorate of Honours and Awards is responsible for the administration of defence-related awards. Individuals can request a re-assessment of decisions in relation to medallion recognition. The process and requirements for these requests vary based on the type of honour or award.

The decision to cancel the awards of a small group of individuals who held command positions during the relevant period was made following the recommendations of Justice Brereton in the Afghanistan Inquiry Report. Justice Brereton recommended that:

- *The Inquiry recommends the review of awards to those in command positions at troop, squadron and task group level during SOTG rotations in [redacted].*

- *The Inquiry recommends reviewing the award of decorations to those generally in command positions in the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) during the period 2008 to 2012.*

These recommendations are the lens through which the Deputy Prime Minister made his decisions in respect of command accountability.

Thank you again for the opportunity to respond to the priorities of the Alliance of Defence Service Organisations. The Albanese Government values your advocacy and engagement on behalf of defence personnel, veterans and their families. I look forward to continuing to work with you as part of a re-elected Albanese Government.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matt Keogh". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Hon Matt Keogh MP
Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Minister for Defence Personnel