

CENTRAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON WAR PENSIONS

MINUTES OF THE 144TH MEETING

14.00HRS WEDNESDAY 14TH JUNE 2006
THE PEPYS SUITE, MOD MAIN BUILDING, WHITEHALL

Details of those present at the meeting are attached at Annex B.

1. CHAIRMAN'S OPENING COMMENTS

1.1 A copy of the Chairman's opening comments is attached at Annex A

2. MINUTES OF THE 143RD MEETING

2.1 After clarification of item 8.1 the minutes were agreed.

3. MATTERS ARISING

3.1 Irene Sheils raised the matter of the disbandment of the Royal Irish Regiment and raised her concerns about the future provision of welfare for veterans and their families. Minister advised that Adam Ingram, the Armed Forces Minister, had given an undertaking that there would be a bespoke Royal Irish Regiment aftercare service, but the exact details were still being worked on. He proposed that the subject was put on the agenda for the December meeting when more details would be available.

AP 01 – CAC Secretariat to ensure future provision of welfare to Royal Irish Regiment veterans and families is included on the next meeting agenda.

3.2 Gill Grigg welcomed the clarification of the use of the term War Pensioner AFCS and Widow AFCS and requested that these terms were reflected in AFCS literature. Peter Davies agreed to do this when the leaflets and literature were being routinely re-printed.

AP 02 – SPPol to arrange for AFCS Leaflets and literature to carry the use of the term War Pensioner AFCS and Widow AFCS.

4. VETERANS AGENCY REPORT

4.1 Tim Taylor introduced the Veterans Agency Report, which had been circulated in advance of the meeting, and highlighted some areas of particular success, including continuing improvement in clearance times and excellent results in the 2005 customer surveys.

4.2 He assured the CAC that he was committed to sustaining VA's focus on customers, and would be considering how service might be improved, in particular by placing more emphasis on quality. He would be looking to make processes more efficient and services more seamless, especially those where VA and AFPAA are both involved. It would be important to bring the two Agencies together in a way which makes best sense for the services they provide. He also wanted to take stock of the skills that people held in the Agency and those that would be needed for the future.

4.3 Jenny Green pointed out that whilst the War Widows Association were pleased that visits were being made to Pre 1973 War Widows, there was a need to visit all widows Pre and Post 1973. Some Post 1973 widows could also be elderly and in need. Tim Taylor agreed to look at this once the visits to Pre 1973 widows were completed in March 2007. A suggestion was made that the contact letter being sent to Pre 1973 widows did not explain the help available to them via the welfare service and needed to be more explanatory and informative.

AP 03 – Veterans Agency to consider visits to Post 1973 War Widows on completion of the Pre 1973 initiative in March 07.

AP 04 – Veterans Agency to re-consider the wording of the letter being sent to Pre 1973 widows.

4.4 Gill Grigg raised the matter of treatment after discharge from Hospitals. Dr Braidwood advised that the provision of healthcare and social services was complex and differed across the four UK countries.

AP05 – Dr Braidwood to provide a note on current care arrangements.

5. WAR PENSIONS POLICY REPORT

5.1 Peter Davies introduced the War Pensions Policy Report, which had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

5.2 The evaluation of the first year of the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme was shortly to be started and a timetable for consultation would be issued to members in the near future. Jerome Church and Sue Freeth requested that a report of consultation comments should be issued and a meeting arranged to discuss any points raised. Sue Freeth offered the use of TRBL accommodation to facilitate such a meeting if required.

5.3 A short discussion took place around the days press report concerning Gulf War Syndrome and the length of time taken for a tribunal decision to be implemented on a case. Minister confirmed that he had made a statement on the subject and Peter Davies reiterated that a War Pension is paid for all disablement due to service no matter what medical label is used.

6. WAR PENSIONS COMMITTEE REPORT

6.1 Jack Hargreaves introduced the War Pensions Committee Report, which had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

6.2 He said that he was pleased to see that the Veterans Agency was looking at improving quality of service and in the efficiency of processes. However he was disappointed that the national advertising which commenced this week did not say anything about where to go for help for someone who had served, nor did it define who was a veteran or make any reference to pensions which may be available.

6.3 Jonathan Iremonger explained that this round of advertising focussed on Veterans Day and was the start of a larger campaign. He would take on board the comments made by Jack Hargreaves.

AP 06 – Jonathan to look at the wording of the notices being put in the press

7. POST OFFICE CARD ACCOUNTS (POca)

7.1 Minister thanked all the members for their comments on the above subject. Irene Sheils declared that she has a particular interest in the subject, as she is a member of the Postwatch. Irene provided Minister with a copy of a Post Office closures customer survey commissioned by Postwatch midlands, for information.

7.2 Ray Holland was particularly concerned that other accounts available at the Post Office being portrayed as suitable alternatives to the card account were too restrictive to make them viable alternatives. Most people had opted for the card account for its simplicity and for reasons that suited their needs. None of the 26 accounts on offer provided the same accessibility and ease of use.

7.3 Sue Freeth was concerned that some Basic Bank accounts require qualifying conditions such as credit scoring before an account could be opened. Opening bank accounts must be made easier and there must be a well organised and well resourced campaign to establish where the most convenient location is for people to access their money.

7.4 Minister thanked everyone for their comments and confirmed that the consensus view of committee members was that the Post Office and the Department for Work and Pensions should not withdraw the card account until there was an acceptable alternative available. Minister agreed to write to the DWP Minister to amplify their concerns.

AP 07 – Minister to write to DWP Minister to express concern at the withdrawal of the Post Office card account.

8. LOCAL AUTHORITY DISREGARDS

8.1 Irene Shiels explained that the many disparities between Local Authorities make the matter of disregard hard to discuss. The War Widows annual general meeting had passed a motion that war widows should not have to complete long and complicated forms to re-apply for their council tax benefit. Irene advised that the re-application form varied between local authorities and could be anything from a single page to a booklet. Ray Holland highlighted that in the 9 councils in his WPC area none required forms to be completed.

8.2 A longstanding matter brought to the attention of the committee was the administration of the disregard by the local authorities. In some cases the local authority was applying a 'notional' retirement pension rate even though the widow was not in receipt of a retirement pension and then applying a full disregard to the rest of her war widows pension.

8.3 The statutory disregard of the first £10 of any war pension is provided for by Department of Work and Pensions legislation; beyond this each local authority chooses whether or not to apply a full or partial disregard. Irene pointed out that if there was a full statutory disregard then there wouldn't be the disparity between councils.

8.4 George Ross advised that many of the letters notifying the annual increase in pensions were issued too late for people. He requested that consideration be given to issuing them a month earlier.

AP 08 – Minister to consider writing to DWP on the subject of Local Authority disregards.

AP 09 – VA to consider issuing the up-rating letters a month earlier

8.5 George Ross pointed out that the AFCS amended legislation stated that people were not covered under the scheme for home to office travel and he felt that this was unfair. Peter Davies acknowledged his point but stated that the amendment was a clarification of the legislation and was not a change to it.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING AND CLOSING REMARKS

9.1 Norman Butler and Irene Shiels thanked Minister and the Veterans Policy Unit staff for the moneys they had received from the challenge fund to hold events for Veterans Day. Norman particularly wanted to record his thanks for the attitude and helpfulness of the staff. Minister confirmed that funding would be available for events for next year and he hoped to see more local events being organised.

9.2 Sue Freeth advised that several people struggle with the claim form when applying for the attendance element of disability living allowance, and asked if the form could be reviewed to make it easier to complete.

AP 10 – DWP to be contacted to request the Attendance element of the DLA form be reviewed to make it easier to complete.

9.3 Minister advised that the date and time of the next meeting would be Wednesday 6th December 2006 at 2pm.

**MINISTER'S ADDRESS TO THE CENTRAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON
WAR PENSIONS**

14th June 2006

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I welcome you to the 144th meeting of the Central Advisory Committee on War Pensions, and my first meeting as Chairman since my appointment as Minister for Veterans last month.

Can I say at the outset that I place great importance upon effective consultation with the ex-Service community. The Central Advisory Committee has a long history of providing sound advice on war pensions issues and I look forward to working closely with you in the future. I have spent the past few weeks trying to get to grips with some of the main issues affecting veterans, I am sure I have much to learn from you.

I have received no apologies for the meeting and there have been no new appointments or resignations.

The Veterans Agency and Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency have been further refining proposals to bring the two agencies closer together to improve service delivery to their customers. My intention is that a customer should be able to access the whole range of services and benefits currently provided by the two agencies. There will be separate front office customer contact points for veterans and serving personnel, supported by a single back office. This will also facilitate the development of integrated business processes and IT, leading in due course to further improvements in services for serving and retired members of the Armed Forces. I will engage Veterans Agency stakeholders to ensure they have a voice in any future proposals.

To retain a sharp focus on the quality of veterans' services, the positive aspects of the VA ethos, and to reassure elderly customers through a sense of continuity, the VA name would be retained. The Veterans' Agency is extremely well respected by its customers and by Veterans' groups more widely; it provides, and is seen to provide, an effective, customer-focussed service which must be carried forward, and improved even further, under any new arrangements. This is as important to me as it was to my predecessor.

Moving onto the new Armed Forces Compensation Scheme, this has now completed its first year of operation and is progressing well. A number of amendments to the legislation are currently being put into place, some of which are to correct omissions identified as a result of experience following receipt of live claims. A letter giving a detailed explanation of the changes has been sent recently which I hope you have all received. The amendments should be in force from 30 June 2006.

After only one year in operation, it is too soon to conduct a meaningful review of the Scheme, as there is insufficient evidence from claims to do so. However policy officials will conduct an initial post implementation evaluation of the Scheme in the next few months. Members of the CAC will be given the opportunity to express your views and indicate areas that you believe warrant examination and policy officials are in the process of contacting members to

facilitate this process. I am grateful for the continued involvement of the ex-service organisations in the progression of the Scheme in these early years. If anyone feels that comments they feed in are not being listened to then they should write directly to me.

The first national Veterans Day will take place on June 27th this year. Events will be held in cities and local communities across the country to mark the contribution of all, young and old, who have served in HM Armed Forces. Veterans Day will raise awareness of the diversity of the veterans community and their contribution and relevance to life in the UK today. It will also highlight the support and advice that is available to those veterans and their families who may need it from official and voluntary sources.

The London focus for Veterans Day will be the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park where we will be fortunate to host a number of Victoria and George Cross holders. Veterans Day coincides this year with the 150th Anniversary of the Victoria Cross and the 50th Anniversary of the VC and GC Association. To commemorate this occasion a service will be held at Westminster Abbey on 26th June and will be followed by a reception for recipients of the Victoria Cross and George Cross.

I am keen that we should raise awareness of our veterans among young people, particularly those still at school and perhaps studying history or citizenship. I am working closely with the Veterans Policy Unit to look at ways we can get our children to understand and appreciate the role played by veterans.

The Veterans Lapel Badge continues to be popular with around 3500 applications currently being received each week. This figure is expected to rise again when the scheme is extended on Veterans Day 27 June to include all those who served up to 31 December 1959.

We continue to publicise the Veterans Agency and its services. This effort is being made on a number of fronts to ensure wide coverage, targeting those who come into contact with and advise veterans, veterans themselves and the public in general. Conferences aimed at those in the charitable and public sectors are being staged throughout the country with the next event due to take place on 3 October in Birmingham. The previous event, in Newcastle, was coupled with a regional publicity campaign promoting Veterans Agency and its Freephone Helpline. This campaign generated a 30% increase in calls to Veterans Agency from the Newcastle area and a similar campaign will be staged to coincide with the Birmingham event.

Notices were placed in five national newspapers from Monday of this week advertising Veterans Day and publicising the Agency and the Helpline telephone number.

MEMBERS PRESENT AT THE MEETING

Sue Freeth	Director of Welfare, Royal British Legion
Ray Holland	Eastern WPC Chairman
Jack Hargreaves	London WPC Chairman
Cathy Walker	Deputy Controller (Branch Support, SSAFA Forces Help)
Irene Shiels	War Widows Association & East Midlands WPC
Toby Elliott	Chief Executive of the Ex-Service Mental Welfare Society
Jerome Church	General Secretary BLESMA
George Ross	Legion Affairs Officer, Royal British Legion Scotland
John Davies	Northern Ireland WPC Chairman
Jenny Green	Chairman War Widows Association
Gill Grigg	War Widows Association, Chairman of Defence Widows Working Party
Claire Parsonage Service	Regional Welfare Manager, War Pensioners' Welfare Service

OBSERVERS

Sean Murphy	Republic of Ireland War Pensions Advisory Committee
Norman Butler	Isle of Man War Pensions Committee

OFFICIALS PRESENT AT THE MEETING

Tim Taylor	Chief Executive, Veterans Agency
Rear Admiral Trevor Spires	Chief Executive, AFPAA
Dr Anne Braidwood	Director of Service Personnel Policy (Medical Advisor)
Peter Davies	Director of Service Personnel Policy - (Pensions)
Jonathan Iremonger	Director of Veterans Policy Unit

CAC SECRETARIAT

Sandra Lloyd	Veterans Agency
Jake Macfarlane	Veterans Agency