

East of Scotland WPC Meeting Thursday 6/10/05
The Poppy Factory, Logie Green Road, Edinburgh

Present

Tim Usher (Chair)
David Hilton (Vice-chair)
Ella Rennie
George MacDonald
George Muiry
Bill Milne
Jean Smith
Sandy Bell
Jamie Campbell
Fergus Robertson
Peter Newlove
Fergus Robertson

In attendance

Mary Spence (Comm. Manager)
Fiona McLean (Comm. Clerk)

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Alan Tapp, Peter Eydes, David Hamer and George Wood. Also not present, but with no apologies received were Drew Thorburn, James Christie and John Drysdale

2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were accepted as an accurate record.

3. Updates from Previous Meeting

There will be no recruitment exercise to replace Emlyn Finnemore.

As regards requests for identity cards, these are being processed. If a member has not provided a photo, they should do so as soon as possible.

Members were reminded that Veterans lapel badges are available free from WPWS or Neil Griffith, PR officer for RBLs, based at New Haig House, on completion of the appropriate form. Both widows and Merchant Navy are eligible. The distribution of badges is being staggered, however, and only applications from those who served during WW2 are being accepted at present.

4. Chairman's Report

It is proposed that VA should be amalgamated with the Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency (AFPAA). This should mean those with a query about their pension should only need to speak to one person. However, it was felt by the chairman

that there are issues around culture, nomenclature and unproven information technology, as well as loss of morale in the run up to the amalgamation to be dealt with. The merger has now been delayed, although the War Pensioners Welfare Service will undertake visits for AFPAA from 17/10/05. An update should be given at the next Central Advisory Committee (CAC) meeting in December 2005.

Communications between VA/WPC have been reviewed. Peter Hulme, Head of Operations for VA is now taking personal responsibility for all WPC reports/ panels and a group attached to the VA Chief Executives Office, which handled all communications to WPCs, is being reformed.

VA Procedural & Legislative Guidance Group (PLG) has now reviewed the WPC member's handbook and the WPC chairmen are discussing the amendments with them. It is not yet known when the new edition of the handbook will be issued.

There was an attempt by VA in June 05 to set up a best practice initiative. The chairman declined on behalf of the committee to get involved, as it was not felt to be worthwhile. The meeting agreed with this. This initiative has now been dropped.

There are now new procedures for obtaining medical reports. Mary can advise on this if need be.

Public relations is now seen as a core activity for the VA, with its' own budget. This will undoubtedly help raise awareness of War Pensions and War Widows Pensions. If members require more posters, please speak to Fiona McLean. If any specific plans for PR come up, members of the committee will be advised.

Following a Central Advisory Committee (CAC) meeting in June, the Minister for Veterans agreed that the WPC Chairmen present should be a sub-committee of the CAC. This will establish a formal line of communication for the WPC to the minister that is not via the Veterans Agency (VA).

This was the first meeting of the CAC that the chairman had attended, where he met the Minister for Veterans, Don Touhig. Some useful information was obtained.

- AFCS awards made while in service are not taxable
- 69,000 Veterans Badges have been issued so far
- VA was the first civil service body to be awarded Investors in People Status
- Since 1973 cohabitantes have been treated as married for pension purposes

The CAC next meets in December 2005

There was a meeting of WPC chairmen and VA in September 2005. There was a private meeting of chairmen beforehand where our new status as a subcommittee of the CAC was noted and a chairman and vice chairman elected. Various matters were then discussed to elicit a common position before the meeting with VA. These matters included *Institutional Indifference* and *Reports on Committee Members*.

At the subsequent meeting Peter Hulme advised that 29,000 pre 1973 war widows were due an extra £2 per week. This action was being taken, but it would take time. Peter was also responsible for co-ordinating panel cases.

Action Point 1- obtain accurate figures for cases being dealt with under AFCS.

Sue Turner spoke about improvements in WPWS and her involvement with AFPAA to discuss arrangements for the proposed VA/AFPAA merger. She also spoke of providing support for pre 1973 widows, and that committee members might be able to help with this.

Dr Anne Braidwood provided lots of information, and pointed out that research into things like Gulf War Syndrome was hampered by the reluctance of those involved to take part in research.

Erik Newman (Head of Communications) reviewed the years' commemorations. He advised that Veterans Awareness Day is likely to become an annual fixture, but it was unclear when it would be held. He is also establishing links with non-military charities such as Age Concern. This is something to be considered for our own area.

Action Point 2- consider inviting Erik Newman to the next East of Scotland WPC meeting

5. Committee Manager's Report

Mary had attended the second Customer Forum in Scotland at Erskine Hospital on 5/10/05. A number of issues were raised which will be looked at by Sue Turner (Head of Welfare) and Peter Hulme (Head of Pensions).

The areas covered by individual Welfare managers in WPWS in Scotland is currently under review due to WPWS staff retiring or changing their hours. The members of the WPC will be advised of the changes once a final decision is made.

As mentioned in the chairman's report above, talks regarding the proposal to merge VA and AFPAA are ongoing. It was noted that WPWS will start undertaking visits for AFPAA as of 17/10/05.

The WPWS Mobile Information Unit (MIU) has been to many locations in Scotland over the summer months, including Kelso, Edinburgh, Montrose, Wick and Portree. The number of callers has varied enormously. Individual WPC members will be notified when the MIU is in their area.

6. Individual Reports

Members reported individually on activity in their own areas. The salient points raised were: -

All members have been very active in displaying posters in surgeries, libraries etc. Some have also helped at events.

Bill Milne was shown round Norcross on 4/10/05. He felt this was very worthwhile. He also has leaflets on AFCS for any member who wants them.

Jamie Campbell brought up the point as to whether the VA Freephone number should be the first point of contact for someone to get in touch with the WPC or if WPC members should give out their number. This was left for each individual member to decide. There was a debate as to whether publicity was going out from Norcross direct. This is unclear. There is also a video from Norcross suitable for use in Prisons.

Peter Newlove advised that he had had a poor response to posters. They were taken down very quickly. He also was aware that doctors knew of the priority treatment scheme, but were not implementing it. Patients were not insisting on it, either as they were reluctant to cause a fuss. Dr Braidwood wishes to know of any problems as she is monitoring the situation.

George MacDonald updated the meeting on the outing organised for veterans in his area. This went well. However funding from the "Not Forgotten Association" will be reduced next year, so it is unclear if future outings will take place. George will also be at the Sutherland SSAFA AGM on 1/11/05 to give a report on WPC and discuss joint working

David Hilton reported an increase in his work as pensions officer for the RBLs. He also advised that the contract for medical examinations was now held by ATOS Origins, and that those attending for medicals are now entitled to increased reimbursement of expenses incurred in doing so. He also mentioned he had been to London with 32 pensioners for Veterans Awareness Week thanks to funding from Home Front Recall.

7 AOCB

None

8. Details of next meeting

Thursday 2/3/06 Main Board Room, New Haig House 11 AM