



# NATIONAL ESO FORUM REPORT

15 NOVEMBER 2022



**RSL**  
Australia



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# FOREWORD

The release of the Interim Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide is an important milestone in the Royal Commission process. The urgent and immediate recommendations contained within it are sensible, significant, and vital.

RSL Australia fully supports the Commissioners' calls for legislative reform, to improve claims processing at the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and to increase protections for those engaging with the Royal Commission. It is now inherent upon the Federal Government, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Australian Defence Force, and all those in the Defence community to push for the implementation of these recommendations.

This is only the beginning of the difficult and important work to come. While not a focus of the Interim Report, the role of ex-service organisations (ESO) and those organisations working to improve the wellbeing of veterans and their families will be vital in addressing the challenges identified by the Royal Commission and continuing its work upon its completion.

To do this effectively, ex-service organisations must work together in a spirit of collaboration and shared purpose. This spirit has been sorely lacking in the ESO space for many years, to the detriment of our organisations, and by extension, veterans, and their families. The sheer number of voices proffered by the ESO sector impedes effective advocacy. The RSL accepts its fair share of the blame for these circumstances.

Our ESO sector is now presented with an opportunity to more effectively deliver on its shared purpose and leverage its collective strengths by uniting to advocate for the needs of those we represent, provide valuable and efficient services, and collectively work to reduce suicide and suicidality among the veteran community. The National ESO Forum was an important first step, and ESOs stand ready for the hard work that is yet to come.

What was clear from the outcomes of the Forum is that there is a great appetite for ESOs to work together.

Together, we collectively agreed that there is a need for a national peak body to be established to represent and advocate the needs of Australian veterans and their families, and the ESOs sector itself. The RSL fully supports this call and recognises that establishing a clearer more unified voice on issues that impact veterans and their families is essential for the future ability of the ESO sector to best meet their needs.

It was also agreed that there was a vital need for a national implementation body to be established by the government following the Royal Commission. This implementational body is crucial for ensuring the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission are actioned with priority and accountability, and are appropriately resourced.

Towards the end of the Forum, several other key issues emerged, the depth and complexity of which demonstrate the immense task before the ESO sector and its stakeholders. It also demonstrates that despite our differences, we have many key concerns in common, and a desire to address them together.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to all those who participated in the National ESO Forum, for their contributions and commitment to what was a successful starting point for continued ESO collaboration.

I look forward to working with all of you on what comes next.

**Greg Melick**

**National President  
Returned and Services League Australia**





# INTRODUCTION

## The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

The [Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide](#) was established on 8 July 2021 to investigate the systemic issues and risk factors relevant to suicide and suicide behaviours of Australia's serving and ex-serving Defence members. Royal Commissioners, Nick Kaldas APM (Chair), The Hon James Douglas KC and Dr Peggy Brown AO were appointed to lead the investigation and to develop recommendations that result in long-lasting and effective change. As at 2 December 2022, the Royal Commission has conducted eight Hearing Blocks, five meetings with the Royal Commission Stakeholder Reference Group, received 2,862 submissions and held 258 private sessions. On 11 August 2022, the Commissioners tabled an Interim Report, which made 13 recommendations regarding issues requiring urgent or immediate action, as well as a range of preliminary observations.

The delivery of the [Interim Report](#) was required by the inquiry's wide-ranging terms of reference. The Royal Commission's terms of reference also require an investigation of "the role of non-government organisations, including ex-service organisations (ESOs), in providing services and support for serving and ex-serving Defence members, their families and others."

Notably, for the most part, ESOs and the ESO system were not addressed in the Interim Report. Despite this, evidence at the Royal Commission has demonstrated the difficulty Defence members, veterans and their families face in navigating the service landscape. These issues will be addressed in detail in future Hearing Blocks and the Commissioners' final report, which is due to be tabled by 17 June 2024.

One of Australia's largest ESO, the Returned & Services League of Australia (RSL), has called for a proactive response from the ESO community to the evidence presented so far, and has taken action to make this happen by facilitating the inaugural National ESO Forum.

This report documents actions taken by RSL Australia as well as each State Branch and other ex-service organisations to deliver the National ESO Forum.

## Examining the ESO ecosystem to deliver better outcomes for veterans and their families

The Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) defines ex-service organisations (ESOs) as organisations that support current and former ADF members and their families. This definition makes no distinction between member-based service providers, commercial organisations that provide fee-based or fee-free services, veteran-led charities or ADF unit/squadron associations.

The RSL notes that the Australian Veteran Support System (VSS) is a complex mix of differently structured organisations that provide welfare, wellbeing and health services to veterans and their families. Anecdotally, there is perceived to be a significant reliance on ESOs and veteran charities for wellbeing assistance and support for veterans who require rehabilitation and recovery care; this service provision often sits outside the delivery of traditional community veteran support systems.

Service coordination between ESOs and veterans' charities is ad-hoc and relational. The services and supports delivered by the ESO sector are not formally regulated, although some ESOs are subject to the reporting requirements of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission

(ACNC) because of their legal structure. Many ESOs have developed their services and supports through peer experience and lived experience and they are not required to demonstrate or evidence the impact and outcomes of their activities.

Interim National Commissioner, Dr Bernadette Boss CSC, in her Interim Report of the Independent Review into Past Defence and Veteran Suicides, noted that there are approximately 3,500 existing ESOs, with the number growing. This report also states that while ESOs provide valuable support and advice to veterans and their families, the current ESO landscape is unplanned, with gaps and overlaps in the provision of services and support. In some services provided by ESOs, there is a perceived overcrowding of organisations. In other areas, there is little to no service.

As the Royal Commission continues and delivers on its terms of reference, it will examine the role of ESOs in providing services and support for serving and ex-serving Defence members and their families. The ESO sector must proactively address issues that have been examined by the Royal Commission and that were not included in the Interim Report. This includes identifying ways ESOs can work together to better serve the needs of veterans and their families.

To enable this, RSL Australia and RSL State Branches facilitated a national forum for ESOs to consider the findings of the Royal Commission and explore opportunities to better meet the needs of veterans and their families. The National ESO Forum, held on 15 November 2022 in Canberra, brought together ESOs from across Australia to:

- Discuss and determine collective ESO responses to the Interim Report of the Royal Commission
- Discuss and determine options for ESO partnership and collaboration, to avoid replication and duplication of services
- Discuss how to assist veterans and their families access services, navigate the ESO service landscape and meet their service needs
- Discuss and determine options to provide a unified veteran voice to Government

Gai Brodtmann, former Federal Member for Canberra and Shadow Assistant Minister for Cyber Security and Defence facilitated the Forum. The three Commissioners addressed participants about the current and future work of the Commission.

The agenda of the Forum followed three thematic discussions, stakeholder engagement activities and an online survey. Participants shared a significant amount of information, which informed the findings and focus areas in the following section.



Gai Brodtmann welcomes participants to the National ESO Forum

# KEY FOCUS AREAS OF THE NATIONAL ESO FORUM

Participants were arranged into two working groups, each group with a representative selection of the different sizes, service types and geographical coverage of ESOs. Working group discussions were facilitated by RSL State CEOs.

## **Exploring the emerging challenges and opportunities for the ESO sector, as revealed by the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide**

Participants expressed that the Royal Commission's Interim Report placed significant attention on the responsibility of the Department of Veterans' Affairs to take urgent action to implement the Commission's recommendations.

It was agreed that the ESOs were also responsible for implementing change and that the sector should work to proactively address some of the challenges and opportunities that have been examined by the Royal Commission, including:

### 1. Transition support

ADF support for individuals transitioning is often inadequate and not proportionate to individual needs. Participants shared experiences of discharge processes completed in a matter of minutes or hours, which had failed to meet the needs of the individual leaving service.

Partners and family (and where appropriate, friends) have a key role to play in enabling ADF members to experience personal stability during service and a positive transition from service. They are currently unlikely to be involved or invited to participate in that process until the serving member has left the ADF. Where partners, families and friends are supported to be part of a member's service and transition experience, they are better able to act as an informal wellbeing network and can identify if or when an individual may need additional support.

Some participants shared experiences of partners who had not been involved in the process and gave examples of how this had compounded their inability to provide support, causing stress in relationships and relationship and family breakdowns.

Participants agreed that ESOs can assist Defence in providing positive transition experiences to serving members, their partners, and families. For this to happen, ADF can invite ESOs to engage with serving members and their families early; ideally as early as during ADF recruitment activities.

### 2. Continuity of funding and political attention

The recommendations of the Royal Commission cannot help veterans and their families if they are not implemented. Implementation will require sustained political attention, adequate funding, appropriate oversight, and sufficient accountability.

It was noted by several participants that a key concern was how the Australian Government would oversee the implementation of the Royal Commission's recommendations.

Specifically, attention was called to the frequency of changes to Ministers representing portfolios that included the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Over the past three governments (2015 – Present), seven Ministers had been appointed, with the Ministry portfolio moved to the outer ministry under the current government.



Additionally, each State and Territory prioritises veterans' needs and issues differently through the structure of its Ministerial portfolios. Participants also shared their experience of the challenges of navigating the split between federal and state/territory government responsibilities for veteran housing, and social and welfare support.

In turn, this has led to systems in which ESOs struggle to provide long-term certainty to veterans and their families because government funding cycles are short-term. Participants shared examples of how funding uncertainty at an individual level can compound trauma, while at an organisational level, it inhibits the recruitment and retention of skilled staff, and inhibits service improvement, innovation and research.

Participants extensively discussed the need to coordinate and collaborate across the ESO sector to continue driving advocacy, progress, and service delivery that sits outside political change.

### 3. Unified voice

Participants shared their experiences of engaging with governments and others who have expressed a desire for the ESO sector to provide a single unified voice to government. While this would make advocacy activities simpler for governments and departments to understand, it would not necessarily reflect the diversity of veterans, their families or the organisations which support them.

Participants focused on how they can better work together to speak to governments about the issues affecting veterans and their families. The working groups identified alignment across many of the issues identified in this paper, and a willingness to take collective action. This includes:

- The establishment of a peak body
- The creation of sector-wide Codes of Practice for service delivery
- The ongoing facilitation of broad-ranging, frequent ESO forums
- The need for guidelines for news media reporting on the experiences of ADF personnel, to encourage balanced and trauma-informed reporting

### 4. Addressing the 'broken veteran' narrative

Reporting about the ADF and the experiences of veterans has followed a global pattern of negative portrayals of broken individuals. Participants raised concerns that the Royal Commission is compounding that narrative.

The Commissioners' agreed and called for ESOs to elevate positive experiences and examples. For example, many veterans bring unique skills to the civilian workforce, with a [report](#) from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare finding that many veterans outperform their civilian counterparts following transition.

Participants expressed eagerness to help the Royal Commission uncover the protective and preventative factors that are present for individuals who have positive experiences in the hope that these will inform the Commission's final recommendations. Participants acknowledged that ESOs have an important role to play in communicating the positive lived experiences of veterans, in addition to the work of the Royal Commission.

## 5. Implementation body

An implementation framework, co-designed with veterans, their families and the organisations that support them, is critical to addressing the issues that surfaced through the Royal Commission.

The Royal Commission, through its Stakeholder Reference Group, has called for feedback on the potential creation of an entity with comprehensive oversight, responsibilities, and powers to drive lasting reform to contribute to a reduction in the incidence of suicide and suicidality in serving and ex-serving ADF members.

Participants agreed wholeheartedly on the need for a framework to be considered further as part of the Royal Commission's ongoing inquiries. Participants shared that a co-designed framework was fundamental to building confidence and trust across all stakeholders that the recommendations from the final report would be actioned.

Participants agreed on the importance of ensuring that this implementation body was appropriately accountable to government, veterans, and their families, the ESO sector and public more broadly. It was suggested that the Royal Commission might usefully look at implementation bodies established following other enquiries if this was not already being done.

RSL Australia has previously developed and proposed an implementation body model that combines the roles of the previous Interim National Commissioner for Defence and Suicide Prevention, with a body that could work with external agencies to investigate and report on the implementation of recommendations of the Royal Commission.

### **Identifying synergies within the ESO sector to enable efficient and effective service delivery**

ESOs play a critical role in supporting veterans and their families to sustain healthy and well-functioning lives. Many ESOs were established to meet the needs of veterans and their families not being met by governments, private or community service organisations for reasons of complexity, lack of awareness, profit, or funding. As the ESO sector has developed in response to need, it has not necessarily focused on collaboration across organisations, common principles, or service standards.

Participants at the forum were keen to explore how collaboration can lift and leverage the services and supports they provide to enable better outcomes for the veterans and families they support. Participants identified the following:

#### 1. Needs-based service mapping

Forum participants recognise that the ESO sector can adapt how it collaborates and coordinates service delivery to better meet the differing needs of distinct veterans' groups. Participants shared how the needs of veterans and their families have evolved.



Forum participants engaged in collaborative discussions in working groups, comprised of a representative selection of the different sizes, service types and geographical coverage of ESOs

Newer ESOs outlined how they had identified service gaps and how they had been established to address them. Older ESOs shared how their experiences of service provision might be useful alongside more contemporary evidence and research that is informing new service offerings.

Participants heard robust debate about what did and didn't work, mixed with personal experiences and views. This informed discussion about the need to map the types and locations of ESO service provisions to create a comprehensive view of the sector.

Participants agreed that a mapping exercise was a priority action for ESOs collectively, but they needed further time to explore how this can best be done. The resulting information could also help to inform other stakeholders, including veterans seeking to access services and support, about the sector.

## 2. Service delivery frameworks

ESOs want to deliver the best possible services and support to veterans and their families. Currently, they are working to the best of their ability with the tools and resources that are available to them to assess the quality of their services and the outcomes they are achieving. It is a mixed landscape.

Participants discussed how a national service delivery framework could lift and strengthen ESO service provision to veterans and their families. It could provide pathways for accreditation and cooperation to help to inform resourcing and funding decisions. Participants agreed that a service delivery framework for the ESO sector can usefully be part of the Royal Commission's considerations.

Participants began initial discussions as to how a service delivery framework might support an accreditation system for the sector. It could provide confidence to funders, including governments, about the quality of services they are investing in. It could also support the referral process for Defence and other stakeholders who are seeking to identify quality services that best meet the different needs of individuals and their families.

## 3. Knowledge sharing

The ESO sector understands the value of knowledge sharing to deliver against a common mission to support veterans and their families.

Participants shared their experiences of working in resource-scarce settings with limited knowledge sharing. While some of this was about the willingness, or otherwise, of Defence and other government stakeholders to engage, it was also a reflection of the current state of the ESO sector itself.

For example, RSL has invested in resources to enable it to have a daily read-out of the Royal Commission hearings because the information in this format is not made available by the Commission. Participants are keen to have access to this type of information either from the RSL or preferably from the Royal Commission itself as this would facilitate engagement with the Royal Commission and collaborative engagement across the ESO sector.

The lack of resources and knowledge sharing across the ESO sector was noted by participants as an area to be investigated to better enable efficient and effective service delivery. Several participants urged the RSL to share resources around the Royal Commission, including the daily summaries it produces.

During the recent Wagga Wagga Hearing Block, RSL Australia provided its daily read-out to forum participants.

Although willing to collaborate, participants discussed the limits of their resources as barriers to knowledge sharing and closer working. Intellectual property and privacy issues were also raised.

#### 4. Standards of practice and measurement

The ESO sector is not currently subject to service standards or specific measurements to evidence outcomes. Participants shared differing views as to the need for and benefits of suggested consistent standards for outcomes measurement and reporting.

Several ESOs noted there needed to be a specific focus on the development of a measurement system that used success metrics directly connected to mental health improvement and suicide reduction.

#### 5. Peak body

Participants discussed the need for an ESO Peak Body, responsible for providing veteran policy advocacy and advice to Government, Defence and DVA. The ESO Peak Body should not be responsible for the administration of the service standards but should have an advisory role on these standards. The ESO Peak Body should be kept separate from any consideration of funding requirements, needs assessment, or distribution.

### **Committing to collaboration with fellow ESOs to advocate into the Royal Commission for the needs of veterans and their families**

Forum participants were joined by Commissioners Nick Kaldas APM, Dr Peggy Brown AO, and Hon James Douglas KC, who emphasised the importance of the ESO sector to their investigation and recommendations. Notably, the Commissioners urged participants to consider the unique engagement their organisations have with families, stating that families served as the emotional barometers of veterans.

Nick Kaldas, APM (Chair) Royal Commission has stated that “we need your help and your stories, so that we can learn as much as we can about the issues and situations surrounding the deaths by suicide of Defence personnel and veterans. We want to hear, learn and then act...informed by your experiences.” The Commissioners urged ESOs to continue making submissions, with Nick Kaldas stating that “your experiences are informing our investigation, and ultimately will help to shape the recommendations we’ll put forward to help save lives.”



L-R, back row. Forum MC Gai Brodtmann, RSL NSW President Ray James, RSL Australia National President Greg Melick, RSL Victoria CEO Sue Cattermole, RSL Australia CEO Phil Winter and RSL Queensland CEO Robert Skoda.

L-R, front row. Commissioners Nick Kaldas APM, Dr Peggy Brown AO, Hon James Douglas KC and RSL NSW CEO Jon Black.

The Commissioners noted that their final report will not be the only output of the Royal Commission and the process aimed to create a compelling case to drive continuing action.

Following the Commissioner's presentation, Forum participants agreed to advocate that the following issues be priorities for the Royal Commission to consider in its next tranche of work:

1. Establishing a national implementation body responsible for delivering the recommendations of the Royal Commission once the final report is delivered
2. Enhancing its focus on the transition period in and out of defence, considering how family history / structure may increase the risk to personnel once discharged
3. Assessing the impact of media reporting on the health and wellbeing of veterans, and seeking to reflect the positive experiences of many veterans
4. Establishing measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for all recommendations in its final report, ensuring success can be measured and assessed regardless of the government of the day
5. Including recommendations that call to establish a veterans' advisory group / council, separate from ESOs, DVA and the government

Forum participants discussed and recognised that there are improvements that need to be made in the ESO sector. Participants discussed and ranked in order of importance the top five priorities the ESO sector should focus on to drive toward their shared mission to support veterans and their families after the Royal Commission:

1. Establish a peak body for the ESO sector to represent and advocate the needs of ESOs, and Australian veterans and their families
2. Map and categorise the services ESOs deliver, and provides measurements of service quality to assist veterans navigating service needs and providers
3. Explore standardised reporting and measurement frameworks for ESOs that use quantitative and qualitative data to measure the success of services and programs
4. Prioritise the establishment of ESO-led in-service transition coaching, support, and resources from ESOs for veterans
5. Advocate for enhanced defence family engagement by calling on government to expand DVA's transition seminars to next of kin to ensure family members are aware of support services available to veterans

## NEXT STEPS AND COMMITMENTS

The first National ESO Forum identified the desire and willingness of ESOs to work together to make it simpler for veterans and their families to access the services and supports they need; to enable government and other stakeholders to better understand the needs of veterans and their families; and to help ensure that the voices of veterans and their families are informing decisions made about them and which impact them, including legislative reform and funding decisions.

Core to the very existence of the ESO sector is a deep commitment to supporting veterans and their families to succeed before, during and after a transition from ADF service. As research and data about different transition experiences become available ESOs are seeking to adapt to meet the differing needs of veterans, which can change over time, and new ESOs are entering the sector to service emerging needs. This renewal and change is further evidence of the sector's commitment to do what is required to best meet the needs of veterans and their families. Across the diversity of the sector, there are differing views and opinions voiced at different volumes. It is admirable that despite this, the sector came together and has agreed to continue to work together to find a way to unify its voice on key issues that are important to veterans and their families and to further collaborate to explore how ESOs can work together to progress the issues identified at the forum.

As requested by the Royal Commissioners at the National ESO Forum, it is vital that ESOs make submissions to the Royal Commission to detail the suggestions, experiences, and issues of the sector. These submissions will directly inform the Royal Commission's inquiry and the recommendations of its final report by painting a picture of the ESO landscape and the problems organisations face.



RSL Australia CEO Phil Winter welcomes Commissioners Nick Kaldas APM, Dr Peggy Brown AO and Hon James Douglas KC to the National ESO Forum



# NATIONAL ESO FORUM REPORT



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