

Royal Commission transcript, Friday 15 March – Secretary Alison Frame

Subject – National Consultation Framework and National Consultation Framework Review

5 Q. But -- yes, I withdraw that. You mentioned ESORT. Let me go to a bigger concept, the National Consultation Framework comprises ESORT and four other forums through which the DVA and two other Commissions communicate with veterans. Is that framework -- how important is that framework for getting input into your work from the ESOs?

10 A. It's really important. It includes the Younger Veterans forum, female veterans, families. It's a very important framework. It's subject to review later this year because we want to make sure that it is the best it can be, like, that it's reaching as many veteran and family groups as it can. And I think there's a recognition that it could be strengthened, we could be expanding our reach. So whilst the groups that we work with at the moment are critically important to our consultation, we are also expanding the scope of engagement as well. And I am aware Ms McLaren spoke about that. But we're not limiting ourselves to just engagement with that group -- sorry, with those groups that are on the NCF, but continuing to add to the 15 engagements directly that we're offering with different veteran groups, with anyone, in fact; with Deputy Secretary-led consultation sessions, we're going to have six this year, where any veteran might want to attend, or family member, and raise issues and interact directly with DVA. So it's a foundational piece but there is a lot of engagement that occurs around that and that will continue to expand.

25 Q. The last triennial review of the National Consultation Framework was the 2019-2020 review and it included a survey that indicated that the NCF is "no longer fit for purpose and requires refreshment", and that the NCF was "no longer effective in representing the majority of the ex-service community". Has the framework been 30 amended as a result of that review?

A. As I said earlier, it's currently being reviewed again.

35 Q. I'm actually asking about the last review, which was the 2019-2020 review; has it been amended as a result -- has the framework been amended arising out of that review?

40 A. I couldn't speak to any changes that might have been made prior to my commencing in January 2023. Since that time, the change that I'm aware of is the splitting of the female and family veterans forum into two entirely separate forums under the NCF. So that is one change that has occurred in the last year. I'm not aware, there may be changes occurred subsequent to the review you just referred to but I'm not aware of them.

45 Q. The information given to us by the Department is that there has been no amendment arising from the review of several years ago, even though it indicated the two things I quoted. I'm not putting this at the individual level and I specifically acknowledge again in your first year as secretary there has been a lot of pressing

priorities, but objectively at a systems level, you would acknowledge, wouldn't you, that it's not satisfactory that a key framework, seen as ineffective and not fit for purpose, has been in that condition for four years or more?

- 5 A. I think we've invested a lot in the last year to expand the consultations that augment the framework. So I suppose I'm suggesting that the framework is not the only structure and mechanism for engagement with veterans and families. And, as I said, there was that change last year, but I couldn't speak to why no further changes were made in the years prior to that.

Q. I did listen to your answer but just in case, do you know why no report of the review was ever prepared, even though the DVA told us in December 2021 that it was anticipated that it would be prepared?

5

A. I don't, I'm sorry.

Q. Do you consider that a peak body of ESOs could benefit veterans?

10 A. I do.

Q. And what about the work of the Department, could it help the Department discharge its functions?

15 A. I do, yes, I do.

Q. You've mentioned, and I promised to come back to it, as I understand it, the Department has agreed to fund a consultant to prepare a so-called business case for establishing a peak body. Work was expected to begin in March 2024. Has the consultant been retained?

20

A. It's very close but I understand the procurement arrangements are not finalised at this point in time. There's been a delay tied to illness in the person, not in DVA but in the person we're working with, so it just hasn't been locked down.

25

Q. Do you have an understanding, however broad, as to when the work will be completed, that is the business case actually produced?

A. Given we haven't finalised the procurement at this stage, I can't say definitively the time frame, but I would certainly like it to be within the next four to five months.

30

Q. Do you have any views at this stage on how a peak body should be constituted and what its role should be?

35

A. In instigating the business case, we're really wanting the ex-service organisation sector themselves to lead a lot of that input and DVA, in funding the business case, has asked the people doing that to engage in really extensive consultation to glean from ex-service organisations what are their preferences, what they think would work best. I think there needs to be a really significant discussion around how we might mitigate risk and ensure that there's maximum inclusion in any peak body and how its governance structures can enable that.

40

So that's what we've charged the consultants to do. Those terms of reference are not finalised yet but I would be happy to share them with the Commission when they are. Was there anything further in your question that I've not --

45

Q. No. I wanted to give you an opportunity to comment. I'll move on to another topic and I'll ask the operator to display the aide-memoire that has been prepared for this session. Thank you, operator. You'll see we have reproduced Recommendation 17.1 from the Productivity Commission report, "A better way to support veterans", and also two extracts to a response to a statutory notice that the Department gave to us.