

Cross-Party Group Minutes

Meeting Minutes

Cross Party Group Title:	Armed Forces and Cadets
Date of Meeting:	27 th March 2025
Location:	Hybrid Meeting – Pierhead Building and Virtual via Microsoft Teams

In attendance:

Name:	Title:
Darren Millar MS	Co-Chair & Member for Clwyd West
James Evans MS	Member for Brecon and Radnorshire
Ken Skates MS (virtual)	Cabinet Secretary, Welsh Government
Mark Isherwood MS	Member for North Wales
Air Cdre Robert Woods (virtual)	Air Officer Wales
Col Sion Walker	Deputy Commander, 160 th (Welsh) Brigade
James Phillips (virtual)	Veterans Commissioner for Wales
Col David Chipp	Deputy Chief Executive, Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Wales (RFCA)
Lt Col Taniya Morris	160 th (Welsh) Brigade
Harriet Mortlock	160 th (Welsh) Brigade
Mike Connolly	Welsh Government
Peter Kellam	Welsh Government
Peter Evans (virtual)	Welsh Government
Graham Jones (virtual)	Chief Executive, Woody's Lodge
WO1 Rob Govier	Royal Navy- SO3 Regional Engagement Wales, West England and Channel Islands
Lisa Rawlings (virtual)	Chair, Wales Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee

Simon Frith (virtual)	Alabare
Neil Lawman	Adferiad, Change Step
Joanna Wolfe (virtual)	SSCE Cymru
Lynne Maitland	Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Wales (RFCA)
Karin Spencer (virtual)	Armed Forces Liaison Officer (Gwent)
Andy Jones (virtual)	Armed Forces Liaison Officer (Powys)
Finola Pickwell (virtual)	Regional Armed Forces Covenant Liaison Officer (South West Wales)
Cllr Glyn Haynes (virtual)	Armed Forces Champion, Isle of Anglesey County Council
Cllr Teresa Heron	Armed Forces Champion, Caerphilly County Borough Council
Cllr Wendy Lewis (virtual)	Armed Forces Champion, Swansea City and County Council
Cllr Liz Roberts (virtual)	Armed Forces Champion, Conwy County Borough Council
Cllr Mark Spencer (virtual)	Armed Forces Champion, Newport City Council
Cllr Peter Strong (virtual)	Armed Forces Champion, Monmouthshire County Council
Tina Foster (virtual)	Veterans and Families Service, TGP Cymru
Rob Salmon	Regional Leader (Wales), Re-Act
Andrew Clark	Chairman, Royal Naval Association (Cardiff Branch)
Amanda Yorke (virtual)	Army Families Federation
Kirsty Gronow (virtual)	The Poppy Factory
Claire Rowcliffe (virtual)	Blind Veterans UK
James Glass (virtual)	Age Cymru Dyfed
Daniel Starkey	Secretary and Office of Darren Millar MS
Tara Moorcroft (virtual)	Office of Darren Millar MS
Ryland Doyle (virtual)	Office of Mike Hedges MS
James Garside	Office of James Evans MS
Troy Tyler	Office of Altaf Hussain MS
Jamie Williams	Office of Altaf Hussain MS
Leo Quigley (virtual)	Office of John Griffiths MS
Eleanor Lancaster (virtual)	Office of Julie Morgan MS
Ella Tregaskes	Welsh Conservative Group Office

Apologies:

Name:	Title:
Alun Davies MS	Co-Chair & Member for Blaenau Gwent
Natasha Asghar MS	Member for South Wales East
Janet Finch-Saunders MS	Member for Aberconwy
Sam Rowlands MS	Member for North Wales
Hannah Blythyn MS	Member for Delyn
Zoe Roberts	Armed Forces Covenant & Veteran Healthcare Collaborative Lead, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board
Cllr David Evans	Armed Forces Champion, Flintshire County Council
Cllr Delyth Gladys Williams	Armed Forces Champion, Gwynedd County Council
Cllr Beverley Parry-Jones	Armed Forces Champion, Wrexham County Borough Council
Cllr Alison Watkin	Wrexham County Borough Council
Lt Col Will Peltor	160 th (Welsh) Brigade
Adrian Leslie	Royal British Legion

Summary of Meeting:

1. Introductions and Apologies
 - Darren Millar welcomed attendees to the Group.
 - Darren Millar stated his intention to step down from the position of Co-Chair, noting that it had been a pleasure to chair the Group and engage with its members for the past 15 years, and that he would continue to engage with the Group in future.
2. Updates from previous meeting
 - The Co-Chairs wrote to Brigadier Jock Fraser to wish him well on his retirement, and also to Commodore Tristram Kirkwood OBE to welcome him into his new role as the Royal Navy's Wales lead.
 - The Co-Chairs wrote to Alastair Carns MP, the UK Government's Veterans Minister, to request permanent funding for the Veterans Commissioner for Wales, and to

highlight the reports concerning female veterans shared by Lisa Rawlings at the previous meeting of the Group, and request an update on the Women's Veterans Strategy.

- Darren Millar received an update from the First Minister regarding veterans' mental health, which was circulated to members of the Group.
- In January, Darren Millar received information from the Veterans' Survey regarding finance and housing, which was shared with the Group.
- Discussions are still ongoing regarding overseas commemoration and a Welsh military museum. A national military museum is unlikely to be delivered before the 2026 Senedd election, but the Chair expressed hope that political parties would commit to one in their respective manifestos.

3. Briefing from Ken Skates MS, Cabinet Secretary for Transport on North Wales.

- The Cabinet Secretary expressed his thanks to Darren Millar for his years chairing the Cross-Party Group, which was echoed by members of the group.
- The Cabinet Secretary acknowledged the Group's wish for a broader definition of service children in Wales. Both he and the Cabinet Secretary for Education are willing to discuss this matter further, and will arrange a meeting to do so in due course.
- However, the Welsh Government has a finite spending ability, and needs to focus on the service children with the most need. There are no current plans to broaden the definition.
- Joanna Wolfe noted that SSCE Cymru is hearing of learning gaps emerging in Wales between service children and their peers. The cut-off point for support in Wales is 2 years, compared to 6 years in England.
- The Cabinet Secretary confirmed that he would discuss this matter with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, and report back to Group at its next meeting.

4. Briefing from Colonel David Chipp, Deputy Chief Executive, RFCA Wales on the University of Northampton's Report on the Impact and Value of the Cadet Forces in Wales.

- Colonel David Chipp outlined the broad benefits of cadet membership to young people.
- The UK Government has received the RFCA's report, and is giving it serious consideration.
- Cadets will, for the first time, be an element within the strategic defence review, due to be published later in 2025.
- Nationally, research is being conducted into the feasibility of a significant expansion of all three branches of the cadet forces. Meetings are ongoing with the view of synchronising this work.
- Challenges currently faced by the cadet forces include finding adult volunteers who can commit enough time, and also securing suitable venues for detachments. The RFCA is reviewing the curriculum and expected time commitments to address the

former, though additional funding is also needed to cover allowances for when volunteers give up extended periods of time.

- In the short-term, the RFCA is looking to focus growth on smaller cadet detachments.
- The report contained four recommendations: increasing young people's participation, taking steps to improve adult volunteer recruitment, increasing funding to allow cadets to undertake vocational qualifications while serving, and ensuring the Welsh Government, employers, and educational leaders are better informed about cadet forces.
- Darren Millar thanked Colonel David Chipp for his presentation, and noted the statistic in the report that Wales has lower cadet participation than the UK average, despite its above-average recruitment into the armed forces.
- James Evans queried the reasons for schools' reluctance to engage with cadet forces. Colonel David Chipp noted that some school leaders view cadet forces negatively, including perceiving them as military recruitment vehicles.
- Air Commodore Robert Woods noted that many air cadets he has met decided to sign up following recommendations from friends. Peer-to-peer encouragement could be valuable in building a positive image for cadets. Councillor Liz Roberts and Colonel David Chipp both agreed.
- A discussion was held on the importance of bilingual provisions for cadet forces. Colonel David Chipp noted that this would not be a challenge in areas with high bilingualism, but would be in others, particularly South Wales. Attempts are made to recruit bilingual people local to particular areas, but recruitment can still be difficult.
- Darren Millar encouraged the Cabinet Secretary to hold discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, in order to make the case for funding to make vocational qualifications available to all cadets. The Cabinet Secretary should report back to the Group on this.
- Cross-party support for the Armed Forces is strong, both in the Senedd and in local government. The Group will work with local Armed Forces Champions to encourage Welsh secondary schools to invite local cadet forces in, which could lead to new cadet groups and meeting spaces, and draw in new recruits and volunteers.
- **The Co-Chairs will work with Councillor Liz Roberts to draft a template letter that can be used by others to send to schools.**
- Darren Millar encouraged Members of the Senedd to highlight the opportunities offered by cadet forces when visiting schools.

5. Overview of the Veterans Commissioners' Annual Report for 2023-2024 by Colonel James Phillips, Veterans Commissioner for Wales.

- The Annual Report was produced in September 2024, and is the Commissioner's third report. It covered a challenging time for veterans, both economically and politically, with significant change in both the UK and Welsh Governments.
- The report's key recommendations were: the Welsh and UK Governments need to look strategically at veterans in Wales, and improve communication to ensure services

in Wales are on par with those in England, and to increase veterans' healthcare funding in Wales, which has not increased to the same extent as in England.

- The Commissioner and Welsh Government have been consulted by the UK Government for its new veterans strategy, which focuses on the themes of celebrating, supporting, and acknowledging the contribution of veterans.
- The UK Government is considering Wales' successful use of Armed Force Liaison Officers (AFLOs) and Veterans' Hubs, which may be used as models for rollout across the UK more broadly.
- The Commissioner is currently in discussion with Walking With the Wounded, who provide OpCOURAGE's coordination framework, to secure provision of their services (providing holistic coordination) in Wales.
- The Commissioner is working with Health Boards and the Welsh Government to secure the establishment of and core funding for peer mentors in Health Boards. Only three Health Boards currently have embedded peer mentors at present.
- The Commissioner is working with stakeholders to improve Health Boards' education on medical service provision under the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC), and also to ensure the fast-tracking of patients in severe cases - this is often in the area of orthopaedics.
- Wales does well in bidding for funding from the AFC Fund Trust, and has been successful in the latest round of application, particularly in the areas of housing and mental health.
- Three Health Boards in Wales have dedicated Armed Forces Covenant Officers: Betsi Cadwaladr, Cardiff and Vale, and Hywel Dda. These serve to ensure compliance with the Covenant, and to push for improvements for veterans' healthcare.
- Five of the seven Health Boards in Wales are currently accredited as veteran friendly. However, only 50 of 383 Welsh GP practices are accredited as such.
- Cost of living pressures continue to be a challenge for veterans and organisations supporting them.
- The Commissioner is pushing for a Veterans' Commissioner for England.
- The Commissioner's tenure has been extended until June 2025, and is likely to be extended to December.
- Taniya Morris asked whether any work is being done to address disparities between England and Wales regarding the transition of service personnel to NHS services.
- Mike Connolly noted that the next Armed Forces Expert Group meeting will be in June - and will feature a discussion of issues concerning veterans' health.
- Cllr Liz Roberts noted that people living in Wales close to the English border struggle to access services across the border, particularly the Armed Forces consultant in Oswestry.
- Mike Connolly noted that the Commissioner has highlighted this issue on several occasions, and that they were hoping to discuss and progress further this in June's Armed Forces Expert Group meeting.
- Cllr Peter Strong asked whether there had been any difficulties associated with the movement of the Office for Veterans' Affairs from the Cabinet Office to the MOD;

some in Monmouthshire Council regarded this as a downgrade. The Commissioner noted that while devolved Veterans' Commissioners had expressed concerns about this, the move, in actuality, appears to have improved oversight, and engagement with relevant sections of the MOD.

- Darren Millar noted that the issues discussed would be picked up by the Co-Chair, who would attend June's Armed Forces Expert Group meeting. He also praised the value of the Welsh Government's interface with the Armed Forces Expert Group.

6. Annual General Meeting

- Alun Davies MS was unanimously re-elected as Co-Chair.
- Darren Millar MS stepped down from the role of Co-Chair, and James Evans MS was unanimously elected as Co-Chair.
- Daniel Starkey stepped down from the role of Secretary, and Kate Pritchard was unanimously elected as Secretary.

7. AOB and Visits

- The Co-Chairs have written to Welsh participants in the Invictus Games to congratulate them on their efforts.
- The Co-Chairs have met several potential donors for the Senedd Armed Forces Scheme to look at improving its operation, and will keep the Group updated on this.
- April is 'Month of the Military Child in Wales'. SSCE Cymru are encouraging people to "Purple Up" (wear purple) on 30th April. Also on the 30th of April, an event to celebrate the 15th Anniversary of Veterans NHS Wales will take place at the Senedd.
- On the 8th of May, a VE Day Commemoration event will take place at the Senedd.
- A Reserve Forces Employer's Reception will be held at the Senedd on the 25th of June.
- In February, Darren Millar visited Washington DC and laid wreath at grave of Welsh-born soldier Robert Williams at Arlington National Cemetery. In May, there will also be a memorial service for Clifford Guard, who was born in Swansea but served many years in the US military, at Arlington.
- In recent weeks, Darren Millar visited Sierra Nevada Corporation Mission Systems in St Athan. Darren Millar and Alun Davies will be visiting Ukraine in the coming weeks, as part of a cross-party delegation of MSs. They will report back to the Group on this at the next meeting.
- The 28th of June is Wales National Armed Forces Day, and an event will take place at Caldicot Castle.