

News story: Joint Communique on International Ministerial (5-Eyes) Conference on Veterans' Issues

On 19 and 20 July 2017, Minister for Defence People and Veterans Tobias Ellwood welcomed delegations from the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to the International Ministerial Conference on Veterans' Issues at the Royal Hospital Chelsea.

Mr Ellwood, The Honourable David Shulkin, US Secretary of Veterans' Affairs, The Honourable Kent Hehr, Canadian Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence, The Honourable Dan Tehan, Australian Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Defence Personnel, Ms Bernadine Mackenzie, the New Zealand Head of Veterans' Affairs, and delegates from all nations came together under a shared commitment to their defence and veteran communities to discuss veterans' mental health and transition from military to civilian life.

Delegates were honoured to be hosted at the Royal Hospital Chelsea and to be shown the grounds by the Chelsea Pensioners. Over the course of the two-day conference, the five countries identified many overlapping themes and mutual challenges, including for some nations addressing and treating post-traumatic disorder, rates of suicide and homelessness among veterans, barriers to mental health care, alternative therapies, veteran-centric approaches to the provision of services, and early intervention.

Delegates had an opportunity to hear from leading expert, Professor Sir Simon Wessely on veterans mental health challenges and were taken by the extent of the research and the key facts and findings. Delegates also visited the veterans charity organization 'Stoll' and had an opportunity to speak with United Kingdom veterans about their experiences transitioning to civilian life.

Delegates recognised that to face these challenges and progress reforms it was essential that evidence based research and data informed policy decisions and implementation. Ministers heard from clinical experts how myths about veterans' mental health were damaging efforts to encourage veterans to seek help as early as possible. They agreed that efforts must continue on improving the provision of information to the veterans community and to transform the delivery of support and services to the defence and veteran communities in all five nations.

Delegates agreed to establish a network between the five nations to share and undertake research and emerging data, confirming their continuing commitment to collaborate on strategies that recognise, support, and care for the defence and veteran communities across the five countries. The initial research that will be undertaken will look at risk assessments and prevention strategies for veterans at risk of suicide.

Ministers thanked the United Kingdom for hosting the meeting and agreed to meet again in Australia in October 2018 to continue the work began at this meeting and to share the outcomes of research undertaken.