

24 April 2008

The Secretariat
Prime Ministerial Advisory Council
Department of Veterans' Affairs
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By email: PMcouncil@DVA.GOV.AU

The RSL & Services Clubs Association welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Discussion Paper on options for a Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Ex-Service Matters and a New Framework for Consultation with the Ex-Service and Defence Communities.

The Association is unfamiliar with the operation of previous consultation committees or other bodies dealing with ex-service matters and will not comment on those.

Our comments will be confined to what we see as the need for the Association to be represented on any newly created Advisory Council as a significant stakeholder in veterans affairs support.

Background

There is some degree of confusion in the community about RSL clubs, RSL Sub-Branched, the RSL in general and the State Branch of the RSL. The RSL & Services Clubs Association of New South Wales ("the Association") - The Association is a not for profit industry association that was formed to be the leading advocate representing the unique interests of the estimated 312 registered RSL, Ex-Services, Memorial, Legion or like Clubs in New South Wales.

Among its main objectives is the protection and promotion of the ideals of the ANZAC spirit and heritage of member clubs. The Association operates independently of the RSL and its sub-branches.

The Association was formed in 2001 and commenced operations in February 2002 with some 22 member clubs. Since the Associations formation its membership has grown to more than 100 RSL and services clubs, with its members clubs having a combined membership of more than one million members.

Some of the biggest and some of the smallest clubs in the country have the letters "RSL" in their title. Some RSL clubs include RSL Sub-Branched in their structures and

some do not, and some RSL clubs are direct supporters of the League and some are not.

There is a perception in the community that RSL and services clubs are huge revenue raisers for the League. In short, there is some confusion in the community about RSL clubs and RSL Sub-Branches; some RSL members and many members of the Defence Force share this confusion. Clubs by their nature are first and foremost a social meeting place for many people and community groups. In fact many of our club members, including seniors, enjoy and rely on discounts on food and beverage and entertainment being provided in contemporary surroundings.

The majority of all RSL and services clubs were originally formed as or from sub-Branches as part of the RSL or alternatively from groups of returned veterans to provide hospitality and comradeship for war veterans. There is an RSL or kindred club in almost every major town throughout the State and most started from meager beginnings, many on land granted by the Government of the day.

While many of the clubs have now become separate identities the vast majority still provide a venue for local RSL sub-Branches to meet and are supportive of RSL ideals and aspirations, particularly on commemorative days such as Anzac Day. Many of these clubs are still governed by a majority of ex-servicemen and women on their Boards.

In addition to now catering for a much wider community participation, RSL and services clubs continue to foster those original ideals of a venue for ex-diggers to meet up with their mates with whom they fought in overseas conflicts.

RSL clubs operate under respective state licensing laws hence there is significant difference state to state. Club membership invariably is a club matter and may not necessarily be related to League membership. Some clubs in some states however do defray or even pay RSL annual subscriptions for eligible club members. Most clubs provide a venue for local RSL sub-Branches to meet and are supportive of RSL ideals and aspirations and provide considerable support by way of veteran welfare activities. As a general rule, clubs are run for the benefit of club members, be they members of the League or not; and the local community. Virtually all clubs offer gaming and quite sophisticated amenities for members. Entry to a club is restricted by legislation to members and guests.

In NSW, changes to licensing laws over the years have resulted in management of clubs being transferred to separate Registered Clubs Boards of Directors who operate independently from Sub-Branches. In the overwhelming number of clubs, their constitutions require that the majority of directors on the licensed club Board must be a full sub-branch member

Membership of an RSL Sub-Branch does not automatically confer right of entry to all RSL clubs. Admission to a club is governed by State licensing laws and most clubs welcome visitors who conform to club rules. In NSW, recent amendments to the

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Registered Clubs Act, confers 'Honorary Membership' status on current serving defence force members, on showing of their defence force ID.

Contributions to veteran welfare

One major role and objective of RSL and services clubs is contributions to veteran welfare.

The member clubs of the Association contributed \$1,140,300 (source latest audited Annual Report) to activities supporting the RSL sub-branches and other veteran welfare during 2006/2007. This includes provision of facilities such as veteran welfare officers, transport facilities, support of commemoration days, financial support for Legacy and War Widows Guild and other ex-service Associations.

In addition, the member clubs contributed an estimated \$1,198,000 'in-kind' for facilities including waiving of room hire for sub-branch activities, ANZAC Day commemoration dinners, administration and secretarial costs for sub-branches and kindred groups.

When extrapolated across the 312 clubs in the RSL and services clubs sector these costs could be as much as \$6 million provided for veteran welfare activity – that is in NSW alone. This figure could well surpass \$10m when Victoria and Queensland clubs are included.

The present role and ability of Clubs to provide this social welfare and supporting infrastructure – which could be labeled "intangible welfare" - has only been possible due to the legalization of gaming machines (1956) and the direction of surplus profits to underpin and support services and activities, such as social, recreation and sporting facilities.

In discussing support for veteran welfare and the Anzac traditions the Association, through its member clubs, has embarked on a major project which it believes provides immeasurable 'intangible welfare' benefits.

Operation CARE

In mid-2006, the RSL & Services Clubs Association, the Returned & Services League of Australia and the Department of Defence joined forces to establish Operation CARE (see attached flyer).

The Scheme provides up to one week's 'Rest and Recuperation' at sites throughout the country for selected Defence personnel and their immediate family, where the Defence member has been repatriated to Australia as a consequence of wounds received in overseas combat operations, namely in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The aim of Operation CARE is to assist wounded Defence personnel and their immediate family to recover from both the physical scars incurred from combat, by providing them some quality time together in a relaxing and stress-free environment.

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The project has been made possible by member clubs of the RSL & Services Clubs Association which have generously agreed to provide funding for the scheme which is in keeping with the clubs' objectives to support their ANZAC heritage. Tooheys Brewery has also supported the program through a donation of \$10,000 as part of its 2007 Anzac Day commemoration as has the RSL NSW State Branch United Returned Soldiers' Fund (\$23,000) through the 2007 ANZAC Day Badge Appeal.

Australian Defence Force Chief, Air Chief Marshall Angus Houston, in launching the program in late 2006, stated the program will improve morale and retention of personnel and strengthen the relationship between veterans and current personnel.

"We hold our forebears in great regard and for them to be doing something like this for the young people who go out there today and serve is a huge step in the right direction and certainly adds to morale and hopefully will be another thing that supports the need to retain people in the ADF", he said.

The program provides these personnel with some respite so they can go away with the family and reflect on what has occurred prior to going back into active service. The wife of the first recipient of the program said that Operation CARE was just what they needed to help them reconnect again and give them the chance to relax.

"We were both really grateful for this weekend away and I think most of all, it was especially nice to think that the RSL and services clubs and the military cared enough to do this for us. It is things like this that really help with retention of people in the defence forces".

Operation CARE reinforces the importance of the relationship between the Australian Defence Force, the RSL community and the RSL and Services Clubs.

National Forum

The Association is a member of a National Forum of the R&SL and RSL and services clubs associations in Victoria and Queensland. The Forum has been established to further the aims of the various organizations at a national level and forge still stronger ties between the clubs and the veteran community.

Among the objectives of the Forum is to promote the introduction of reciprocal rights for veterans around to country, allowing them ease of entry to all RSL and services clubs and access to discount meals and drinks afforded to members of those clubs.

The forum also provides the ideal platform where all States are represented and have input into issues pertinent to the future of the RSL Brand and consider any potential new marketing or business opportunities that could be of mutual benefit to both the RSL at a National and State level. Among those issues high on the agenda are the introduction of a national membership system for the RSL by 2010.

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Recommendation

The Association has deeply embedded ties to the veteran community and defence forces, both past and present. It therefore proposes that, as the Association is a major stakeholder in the delivery of veterans affairs, that it be represented on any new Prime Ministerial Advisory Committee on Ex-Service matters.

In terms of the length of appointment, to enable continuity we would propose a term of at least two years. The Association would not propose remuneration of members but would advocate payment of travel costs for members of ex-service organization. This Association would be prepared to cover its own travel costs to attend meetings.

Representatives of the Association are available to discuss our proposals further should it be required.

Kind regards

Graeme Carroll
Chief Executive Officer