

WELFARE SECRETARY REPORT 2020

Coronavirus: changes to Veterans UK Services

Due to COVID-19 precautions, all Veterans UK services are operating via remote working and this has meant we have had to change several of their services.

Please be reassured that all Armed Forces Pensions, War Pensions and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme regular payments will continue to be made as usual into your nominated account. They are also maintaining urgent welfare support for veterans.

Changes to services are as follows:

Veterans UK Helpline

Unfortunately, they are currently unable to offer a telephone service from the Veterans UK helpline and they apologise for the inconvenience this may cause. Urgent enquiries, including requests for welfare support and for anyone experiencing payment problems, can be sent via email to Veterans-UK@mod.gov.uk. A reply or call back will be provided as quickly as they can but please be aware their reply times may be longer. Urgent emotional support is still available from the Samaritans by calling their helpline 0808 1914 2 18 and pressing option 1.

Veterans Welfare Service Support, Defence Transition Services and Integrated Personal Commissioning for Veterans

To protect staff and veterans, they have decided to suspend, except in the most exceptional circumstances, all face to face meetings with clients. However, advice, information and support is still available via email and telephone call back. Please email Veterans-UK@mod.gov.uk with your name, national insurance or reference number and contact details and we will be in touch as quickly as they can.

Armed Forces Pensions

Please be reassured that all Armed Forces Pensions payments will continue to be made as usual into your nominated account.

Pension enquiries can still be answered by calling the JPA Enquiry Centre on 0800 085 3600 during the hours of 10am to 4pm.

They are also prioritising work to commence new pension payments due to those leaving the Armed Forces, Death In Service entitlements and Widows and Dependents pensions.

Processing of Early Payment of Preserved Pension applications is being maintained although timescales may be longer. Applications from individuals who are terminally ill are being prioritised.

Pensions on Divorce administration work is currently suspended - they will recommence this work as soon as the Government's control measures are relaxed.

Pension transfer work is currently suspended - they will recommence this work as soon as the Government's control measures are relaxed.

Pension forecast request work and Internal Dispute Resolution Procedures casework has been suspended, although ill health forecasts are continuing to be issued.

They are continuing to review their processes and priorities and updates will be posted at www.gov.uk/veterans-uk as they become available.

WELLBEING AND PETS PROPOSAL FOR THE RBL

It is well documented that pets are an aide to a person's wellbeing. The companionship that a pet provides and the endorphins released by the act of stroking and looking after an animal has been recommended as therapy for individuals suffering from depressive illness, including PTSD. Below is a statement taken from the "Pets and Mental Health" section of the United Kingdom Mental Health Foundation (<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/p/pets-and-mental-health>):

"Pets and mental health

The companionship that a pet offers is a great way to reduce anxiety and stress.

A pet can be a great source of comfort, companionship and motivation for their owners. In many ways, pets can help us to live mentally healthier lives."

The website goes on to state:

"Pets and depression

Pets are a great motivator for people. Dogs especially are great at encouraging owners to get exercise, and this can be beneficial for those suffering from depression. Pets can also have calming effects on their owner. Just by stroking, sitting next to or playing with a pet can give owning a chance to relax and calm their minds. Caring for a pet also gives your day purpose and reward, and a sense of achievement. It also helps you feel valuable and needed."

This issue came to the fore recently as a number of veteran colleagues are monitoring and supporting a friend suffering from PTSD and is heavily dependent on the support of his beloved pet, the family dog that has been diagnosed with cancer; adding to his suffering.

As Welfare Secretary, it was decided to carry out some research into this area with a view to evidencing the support that a pet (particularly a dog) can have on the wellbeing of an individual suffering from mental health issues.

(<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/p/pets-and-mental-health>) is an article from "Dogs for Good" who are experimenting with using dogs as "animal assisted therapy" on a mental health ward in Surrey and borders. The article goes on to state:

"Animal Assisted Therapy is a well-established practice in many parts of the world, but is less advanced in the UK. So, this pilot is a significant opportunity to explore the role that Animal Assisted Therapy can play in mainstream healthcare practice."

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-right-balance/201804/how-dogs-drive-emotional-well-being>) is an article from "Psychology Today" from the United States, who seem to be much further forward with their research in this area than the United Kingdom on the subject of "How

Dogs Drive Emotional Well-Being". This article highlights the many ways that dogs are beneficial to supporting those with mental health issues.

(<https://www.dogowner.co.uk/dogs-mental-health/#4>) is an article taken from "Dog Owners UK" and their section on "How Dogs Can Help with Mental Health – Mind Boosting Benefits of Dog Ownership". This article lays out in detail the benefits of how a dog can support an individual in many mental health situations.

Conclusions

The following conclusions were made on the research and evidence:

- The evidence is strong that pets, and dogs in particular, are an advantage to helping personnel suffering from a range of mental health issues including:
 - Anxiety
 - Depression
 - Personality and Bipolar Disorders
 - Stress
 - Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
 - PTSD
 - ADHD
- Although there is research ongoing in the UK, the provision of facilities in this area are limited.
- Although there are numerous Forces and Veterans organisations providing excellent support for personnel suffering with mental health ailments, there is little provision for those individuals to bring their pets along to support and aide their recovery.

Recommendations

It was recommended that:

- Further research is carried out in this area by the RBL to:
 - Investigate and gather information from regional association secretaries and with other associations if there are some sort of database of all the known MH cases out there where the individual has failed to make positive contact
 - Reach out to those veterans who have possibly avoided the help they need due to having to look after their pet(s).
 - with a view to the provision of facilities that support personnel suffering from mental illness that allow pets, dogs in particular, to be brought along to aide their recovery.
 - Consider how to get veterans in need with their pets together in a "Battleback" type venue possibly for short occasions a couple of times a year
 - Consider making an announcement to sound out interest from our veterans, spread the idea and ask for feedback through social media i.e. Facebook and regimental Facebook pages possibly instigated by a short article in the Legion magazine on the idea and request regimental associations post it in their respective media web pages/Facebook pages.
 - Identify any locations/facilities etc. suitable to see where they could make start.
- That the RBL consider using dogs and pets to aid the recovery of personnel suffering from mental illness.

Dennis Norris, Welfare Secretary