

ASDIC CONFERENCE MAY 2022

GAPS AND BARRIERS, JOINING THINGS UP

Good morning and welcome back. Yesterday, our aim was to tell the story of ASDIC, its Drop-In community to date, and its unique contribution to the veterans' welfare landscape, as society shifts to a more community focus.

But of course, this isn't the end of the story – nor is the landscape and our place in it perfect. There is still a huge amount to do. I'm sure all of you here will agree that we can be even better at joining things up and avoiding duplication of effort – closing gaps and removing barriers which might prevent the optimum solution being delivered to our veterans.

So this morning we'll take this theme forward and look at some of the activity out there which aims to support and improve our work on the ground – and most importantly deliver resources where they're needed.

Let me start with a little more detail on the Veterans' Places, Pathways and People Programme

As I said yesterday, there's huge potential for greater collaboration with the regional networks established under this AFCT grant giving programme. Each lead organisation in the 10 allocated regions is managing a portfolio of funded projects, that link together themes of work supporting veterans. These organisations may be small independent bodies – veteran or civilian led – or regional outposts of military charities. But importantly, they're starting to work together. Understandably, several ASDIC members are involved, both at the Portfolio and Project level, as this is how the work of our Drop-Ins is delivered. But the financial support from the VPPP programme will establish a firm foundation from which to carry this concept forward, strengthen the networks, and extend their reach.

The Portfolios are also beginning to engage with other support organisations in their regions, beyond those that are directly funded under the programme. This is important, as many Drop-Ins can offer a safe place before and after referrals to specialist help, and often deliver vital social environments and wellbeing activities.

There are four Strategic Leads delivering support in their specialist fields to these Portfolios and as one of these, ASDIC is playing a key role in advising on Drop-In activity and the already established networks. On behalf of these Strategic Leads, I'm also chairing regular meetings so issues can be aired and shared – and then passed on to a wider Oversight Group which reaches governmental, statutory and national bodies. Portfolio Leads also have their own regular meetings with their Projects and local networks so that appropriate action can be taken, and knowledge circulated. All this is designed to join things up – and leave a legacy of long-sought-after collaborative working practices. There are promising signs so far – the London Portfolio alone had some 44 attendees at its launch, and many others are developing these sorts of relationships. What is exciting is that there's clearly an appetite to make this work, especially amongst our smaller charities and local delivery organisations.

Importantly, ASDIC will be working to ensure that the work of our Drop-Ins is rewarded with maximum benefit from this initiative. After all, Drop-Ins work by using the connections they develop within communities. It's obvious that all these networks must be exploited to the n'th degree – and by every stakeholder in the sector - if they're going to deliver the best integrated service to our veterans.

Further collaboration involves integration of delivery with.... Local Authorities

In a bid to ensure services for veterans are more joined up, we've seen how the organisation of our nation is divided. We have 12 governmentally approved regions and devolved nations; then there are well over 200 NHS Trusts, 48 Counties divided up into 82 metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, and 343 local authorities. And, surprise, surprise.... most of them do things in completely different ways, which can unwittingly produce gaps in provision and barriers to progress.

One of our fundamental beliefs is that although a citizen becomes a serviceman and then becomes a veteran – he or she always remains a UK citizen. Local authorities have a huge influence on our lives as citizens, and they also have specific responsibilities for veterans under the Armed Forces Covenant. Some local authorities do this better than others, but the recent Armed Forces Bill will strengthen their need to deliver on this.

The AFCT has awarded £6.6m through two rounds of funding in the last couple of years enabling local authorities to deliver consistent support to their Armed Forces communities. Much work has been targeted at improving awareness in the community, and supporting better access to services. But funding was also made available to establish Drop-Ins where needed – and ASDIC remains involved in advising on these initiatives.

An important piece of research called ‘Our Community, Our Covenant’ was published back in 2017 which is now being revisited and updated, and ASDIC looks forward to being more involved.

There is always the challenging, overarching question of financial provision to support our services, so perhaps I should now comment on the important question of.... Sustainable Funding

And the accent is very much on sustainable! We know that every Drop-In is individual, and they range from well-established organisations like VOS, with a sophisticated operating model, to smaller, frankly hand-to-mouth groups looking for a friendly room to rent and the cost of coffee and biscuits. However, they all have the same problem of adequate financial provision, for now and into the future. A few may be fortunate, not least with the help of their local authority or perhaps a long-term agreement with a community group. Others have forged an agreement with a local businesses or hospitality venue – and there have been wonderful examples of ongoing generosity – but it doesn’t take away from the fundamental problem that the work must be paid for from somewhere, and on a regular basis.

I fear I have no magic money tree to offer here, but I do believe that as ASDIC’s knowledge of Drop-In needs increases, and our influence with potential funders becomes more intimate, we can act as matchmakers. We can facilitate the flow of funds both to satisfy longer-term needs while also giving confidence to the funders that their money will be appropriately spent. ASDIC has no wish to become a grant-maker; there are many others who can do that, but we do believe that we have the potential to improve the efficiency of funding.

Summary of Gaps and Barriers

To finish I’d like to summarise the several issues I raise by referring to a recently published report following the Lord Provost of Edinburgh’s Commission on ‘The Strategy for our ex-Service Personnel’..... and highlight some of the findings.

- Support services are key to health and wellbeing when transitioning, and barriers to accessing the right help are commonplace
- Creating hubs allows for integration and enables veterans to access a wide range of services
- Further development of Drop-In centres is a priority
- Key agencies agree that more effective coordination, possibly through a network of hubs, would help enormously
- The need is for a support community which exists physically and where there is a door on which to knock.

I will leave you with those thoughts.

We believe that this is true across the UK, and our whole sector must hold itself responsible for the eventual delivery of a satisfactory outcome.