

ASDIC Conference May 2022

What a privilege and pleasure it is to see so many here today from the asdic community, together with those who generously support our members in all manner of different and important ways.

I am Malcolm farrow the regional director of asdic and one of the founding originators of our association way back in 2016. Long ago in a previous life i did about 39 years in a dark blue uniform. Since then I've also been a senior civil servant and various other things too

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What is a drop-in? It asks on your programme. Well, by the end of today, if you don't know already you most certainly will. So my purpose for the next few minutes is to set the scene: to establish the ground rules so to speak.

Before I do I'll just mention that between mid 2016 and late 2019 I was privileged to be able to visit over 50 drop-ins all around UK. My nationwide journey was only halted by covid, and it's fair to say the currency of those visits is largely out of date by now. More recently I was stopped in my tracks by the fuel crisis last autumn which erupted the very day I was about to set off on a 600 mile round trip of the midlands and north west. Things are a bit better now and visits once more are possible.

Every one of the drop-ins I have visited is different and I have no doubt the many more I have not visited are similarly unique. Drop-ins operate in different ways to suit local circumstances and the wishes and aspirations of those who run them, although many follow a general pattern - but still they are all different. They do however have one overriding element in common in relation to our veterans.

In one short phrase a drop-in is *a safe place with a familiar feel*. It's a place where a vulnerable veteran or close family member will receive an understanding, friendly welcome and immediate support, and then be able to begin the recovery process back to peace of mind and re-inclusion into normal daily life once again. Empathy is what you encounter in a drop-in.

What does this really mean in practice? When you walk into your kitchen you feel at home. You understand your surroundings and the people you find there and they understand you. There is immediate recognition of your culture and your experience. There is a Danish word for this which became popular here some years ago - hygge. It's not directly translatable but describes a quality of cosiness and conviviality engendering a feeling of contentment and well-being. Hygge

isn't far from our warm little word 'hug' is it? That's not surprising because a hug provides emotional support and friendship whilst lowering blood pressure. We all need a hug from time to time and some of us sometimes need one quite urgently. So yes – when you walk into a drop-in centre you get an empathetic virtual hug which is not judgemental and is blind to your particular service, regiment, specialisation, corps, rank or former military status. A drop-in recognises one thing only – the unique nature of military service which you experienced. We are all of one company in a drop-in. Never forget that.

So in essence a drop-in is the A&E department for the vulnerable veteran seeking help in his or her locality, especially at awkward times when other help may not be so readily available. The drop-in provides a friendly doorway which, depending on the need, very often leads onwards by managed referral to the NHS or the expert help of the established national or local charities. Drop-ins are a critical element in the overall patchwork of veteran support. They do not stand alone just as no other element of the patchwork stands alone. They are not in competition with bigger charities, nor an alternative to them, because every piece of the jigsaw is needed and asdic's purpose is to strengthen the linkage and the network. That is why we are all here in Leeds.

But, you may say, isn't that what a breakfast club does and there are lots and lots of breakfast clubs all over the land. Yes there are and asdic works ever more closely with the breakfast clubs and of which we are a strong supporter. However the difference is quite simple. Breakfast clubs begin with a social theme whilst drop-ins begin with a welfare theme. Nevertheless many breakfast clubs go on to develop a welfare arm too and not infrequently morph into drop-ins or run a drop-in in parallel, whilst drop-ins very often expand the social side of their work as well and sometimes run a breakfast club in addition. Breakfast clubs and drop-ins are the two sides of the same coin, different but absolutely complimentary and mutually supportive.

It is also beneficial to understand what a drop-in is not. It is not a call centre; it is not an 'official' office; a signposting system or a bureaucratic organisation. Just think of the struggle Ukrainian refugees have ploughing through the completely inappropriate UK visa application process after their harrowing escape. That amounts to everything a drop-in is not. Vulnerable refugees need a drop-in not a clerk. Just the same way as vulnerable service leavers need empathetic support when their lives have hit the buffers.

Here I throw in a quick comment on nomenclature. We use the term 'veterans' a lot, but many of those needing the support of a drop-in do not like that term and will not use it, especially younger ones. They very reasonably prefer to be called service-leavers. After all a 30 year old is hardly a veteran is he or increasingly – is she?

Whilst at the naming game, drop-ins themselves go under several different names, hubs being a very common one. In asdic we generally use the term drop-in but whatever they are called if they comply with the simple criteria I have outlined then we welcome them into membership, knowing our vulnerable shipmate (please allow me one nautical term) will be well cared for once on the radar.

During the course of today you are going to hear directly from a number of different drop-ins, and also learn about the experience of those who have been helped by a drop-in. It is that practical and emotional help which is the rationale for the drop-in to exist and by which their success is measured.

In the breaks between formal sessions you have the opportunity to meet several more drop-ins who are also here present. Use these opportunities to learn what goes on elsewhere, to swap ideas and widen your networks. For those from the wonderful support organisations and charities who have joined us today, this can be a team building time because together is better and the more you understand the drop-ins you support and more they understand you, the more effective will be that support 'you so generously give.

Enough from me – let's get the ball rolling