

## ASDIC CONFERENCE MAY 2022

### WHY ASDIC?

Good afternoon, everyone, and firstly may I extend my own personal warm welcome to you all to our conference. As many of you will know, I became Chief Executive of ASDIC in late 2019 – with a background of 18 years in the Royal Navy working initially on weapons trials and analysis, and then moving to wider MoD Staff appointments. Over the years since then, whilst working in various management and organisational positions, I've maintained strong ties with the ex-Service community and veterans' welfare sector – and I'm delighted now to be channelling some of this breadth of experience into my latest role.

So my task over the next 15 minutes is to explain where ASDIC came from and why, and show you where we are now.

The film clip you've just seen describes the original ASDIC – and there may be some of you here who remember the film – The Cruel Sea. And, amusing as it is to see old black and white film clips, I believe it does offer a little context.....

We now use the term ASDIC to mean the Association of Service Drop-In Centres and we're a membership organisation for the growing number of centres that Malcolm described before lunch, which deliver support and guidance to our veterans at their point of need - and have the shared goal of integrating every veteran into their community.

So going back to the original ASDIC you could say there is a similar principle at play here – our Drop-In network now searches for, and finds, our hidden, and perhaps previously unreachable, veterans ..... and this is an equally important job.

*So where did we come from? Let me give you... A short history lesson...*

Once Veterans Outreach Support had been established, some of the team there felt that there must surely be more of this activity going on, addressing similar needs, across the UK. And so Malcolm set off on road trips around the country to discover what he could. It soon became clear that yes, there were many others and he began to make note of their people and activities. Most importantly, he got to know them – and them him – and several of those early contacts are here today. What swiftly became apparent was that this informal fellowship was what many veterans wanted – a practical, informal 'on the ground' link where they could find immediate support. Wow – this information needed to be shared, so Malcolm's list soon became a directory which then became a website; the idea of a membership organisation was born, and the name ASDIC was established. Things began to move rapidly after this and as the network grew – and its sharing powers and reach were recognised – the word spread. By late 2019, ASDIC had around 60 members in 70 locations. And it was at this point that I took over the reins and began to think that while this support network and information sharing was proving valuable, there must be much more that we could offer our members.

*But then of course the world changed..... The Pandemic, VSNBF grants and Independence*

Unfortunately, my plans to meet as many members as possible in my first year were soon thwarted by the pandemic. I became slightly despondent that my aim to get alongside the membership and find out what inspired them would never get off the ground. And we feared that Drop-Ins might succumb and follow other organisations in withdrawing to their bunkers and Zoom screens – but absolutely not! The challenging national situation saw the Drop-Ins do everything they could. Our local, passionate volunteers rose to the occasion with incredible initiatives to continue supporting our vulnerable and isolated veterans. We heard many tales of online support and virtual social activities, delivery of hot meals and medical requirements, visits to gardens and chats through windows and more – often operating hand in hand with wider networks of local support. The activities grew and with them, came the increased visibility and mutual recognition of the impact of so many generous, community based organisations across the UK.

Early on, I was approached by Melloney Poole who we'll be hearing from later, who was the Chief Executive of the A'F'C'T' at the time – proposing to deliver a package of grants to those smaller organisations providing such valuable

and immediate support 'on the front line' and asking ASDIC – together with Age UK and Cobseo – to facilitate access to this for our membership. The programme was entitled 'Veterans Should Not Be Forgotten'. Not only did it enable vital funds to get down to grass-roots level, but it also showed ASDIC's worth in providing support for funding opportunities.

While our communities were working at full stretch at the coalface, the small team in ASDIC began to address our own governance structure – whilst working from home. We soon achieved independence as both a registered charity and limited company – and this enabled us to open a bank account and receive a grant from the Covenant Fund to continue our activities. We began to spread the message of the important work going on at local levels, to both the political and governmental landscape, and the larger, well-established military charities. As the year progressed, ASDIC began to receive direct approaches from organisations looking to reach largely unknown veterans in need and support grew swiftly for what ASDIC was doing.

ASDIC had become the voice of its membership at every level.

*Let me now talk a little bit about.... Sustainability and Governance*

Looking at where we are today, ASDIC's ongoing objectives concentrate on maximising the sustainability, resilience, effectiveness and delivery of our Drop-In centres. But although we have these broad objectives, we certainly have no ambition to challenge the many well-established charities in the sector – indeed we wish to work more closely with them and coordinate with existing resources.

ASDIC offers support, guidance and mentoring – and represents the Drop-In community at every level. We provide and promote a network of cooperation and communication, together with safe, shared best practice in service delivery. But obviously each Drop-In is independent, with its own governance and style of operations, and ASDIC encourages this flexibility with a minimum of formal strictures. Nevertheless, we are determined that risk management takes a high priority – and we appreciate that some within the sector may be uncomfortable with our approach. So perhaps it's worth stating that over 70% of our membership are registered charities or charitable organisations. And there are nearly 50% who are also Cobseo members. We ask members to agree to a Code of Conduct. This is based on best practice and respect for others, and the obvious need to meet statutory requirements. We strongly believe that the passion and pride felt across our membership acts as a self-policing mechanism should any fellow member 'get it wrong' or push the boundaries a bit too far. An experienced leader will be swift to offer guidance to any neighbouring organisation in trouble. So it has proved – ASDIC's job is to make the right connections, with a light touch on the tiller.

*Informal we are and wish to remain, but even an informal movement needs a bit of organisation, so let me talk about .... Community Focus and Regional Structure*

ASDIC now has a membership of 83 and counting, covering nearly 120 locations across the UK. We are conscious that there are more centres out there that we haven't heard of – and we are often informed out of the blue, of a new local organisation to reach out to and support. There's no doubt there has been a cultural shift towards community activities and homegrown support – especially since the pandemic. We're now seeing a surge in community groups offering incredible support to the refugee crisis in Ukraine, not least amongst our own Drop-Ins and their fellow small veterans' charities locally.

For ASDIC, focussing on communities is our way of doing business. So to offer the support we want to and meet our members' needs, we have established a regional footprint. This is led by our Regional Director and his team of volunteer Regional Coordinators (or RCs) who offer an understanding of their neighbourhood communities and local culture. We now have 12 regions, which align with governmental arrangements including each devolved nation. This is enabling us to better support local needs and open a more direct line of communication to bring valuable feedback from members to our attention. These RCs are also best placed to welcome new members in person and act as the ASDIC representative at the local level.

You'll appreciate things have been moving quite swiftly these past years, and sometimes we seem to be in a permanent state of 'catch-up'. We are well aware that there's still much to do in bedding down our organisation – and liaising with our membership – but this is all now beginning to happen. And where it's not – it soon will be!

*So let me touch on some important initiatives we're currently pursuing that are aimed at continually improving what can be delivered on the ground..... Delivery, Collaboration and Reach*

At this point I should introduce you to our HQ team. Initially I was supported by just 3 part time semi-retired veterans – it sounds rather like Last of the Summer Wine doesn't it?! -- and although 2 of those remain, we've now welcomed a full time Development Director – Chris – who is behind the scenes today having been the drive to bring this conference together. However, he's considerably more than just our 'fix-it' man, having been the commercial director of the professional body for the events and entertainment technology industry, and freelanced as a strategy consultant most recently with the Royal Engineers Association. His contribution to the team is invaluable, and he's been working tirelessly since his arrival last summer on developing plans for more targeted support to our membership in the longer term, and devising readily useable data capture to meet the needs of the wider sector. I'll be providing an update on all this and more in my final slot tomorrow.

We have also, most recently, taken on Sacha full time as our new Membership Engagement Officer – and Olivia for 2 days a week who will be improving and extending our marketing footprint where required. I'm sure you will have met both of them when you signed in this morning!

One of the most practical services that we are now delivering is our VetCheck arrangement with Veterans UK, who have been hugely helpful in setting this up with us. For our members only, through an online application and with the veteran's permission, we can verify a veteran's service within 24 hours of submission – an almost immediate answer for our people, whose housing arrangements, financial support, funeral costs or other vital support rely on this confirmation. On average we're now seeing 3 or 4 applications raised a week.

In general, our delivery depends on engaging with support organisations embedded in the local community. As you heard from Malcolm, these can be NHS services, local government support, other statutory bodies or nearby civilian welfare charities and businesses. As well as the obvious large military charities, small charities and community groups are offering health and well-being support that is a lifeline to many veterans. This is all part of the support delivered at the point of need within communities and demonstrates the importance of collaboration in extending our reach.

Although we began to knit together this local delivery concept through our own networks, ASDIC was delighted when asked to become a Strategic Lead for the recent AFCT grant giving programme - Veterans Places, Pathways and People, or VPPP. As many of you will know, this is designed to distribute valuable funding down through Portfolios of different but complementary Projects in regions across the UK – strengthening these networks. For ASDIC this was a valuable injection of resources to not only reinforce our own contribution, but also to stir the whole sector into mapping the landscape of local, community-based support and collaborative working. VPPP is still in its early stages, but this is an exciting opportunity for the whole sector to 'reach parts that others haven't', leaving a strong legacy of ongoing support and joined up delivery across the sector. As you will appreciate, this is an important development for us all and I will be talking about it in more detail tomorrow.

Another collaborative initiative that we're just beginning to take forward, is the development of a closer working relationship with the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committees network. Like us they work within regional areas across the UK. Both our organisations seek to increase awareness of veterans' needs and help deliver successful outcomes – so we have agreed to pursue a regular arrangement for RC attendance at VAPC meetings so that we can share local knowledge. Most importantly, joining things up and strengthening the veterans' network, leading to successful integration into local communities, is what our mutual work is all about.

In Summary, we have...

.... achieved independence and grown our profile, contributed to the VSNBF programme in getting funding to grass roots organisations, increased our membership, established a regional footprint and volunteer led structure, introduced VetCheck, been awarded a strategic role within the VPPP programme – and now organised a major Conference.

Having heard briefly why we and the Drop-In community exist – I hope I've left you with a better understanding of our unique contribution to the landscape.

I will close there for now – as there's more to tell and I want to let you enjoy what remains in store this afternoon.