

Chapter 4

Conclusion and recommendations

4.1 This chapter outlines the conclusions and recommendations of the committee arising from the hearings in Bendigo and Wodonga.

4.2 As has been highlighted in previous interim reports, communities are extremely supportive of Defence facilities in their region. This support was again emphasised in Victoria.

4.3 The committee was pleased to hear there is genuine goodwill from local councils, business and community representatives towards the Defence presence in their region, as well as recognition that there are benefits to both Defence and the broader community as a result of collaborative relationships. To ensure this level of goodwill continues, it is important for Defence to ensure that existing relationships are maintained and new opportunities for communication and cooperation are pursued.

Access to Defence facilities

4.4 A key issue raised at both hearings in Victoria related to the ability of community members to access facilities located on Defence bases. Of particular concern to witnesses was facilitating easier access to military museums located within the perimeter of Defence bases. It was emphasised that increasing visitor numbers to these facilities is important both in the context of the local regional tourism industry as well as promoting greater community awareness of Australia's military history.

4.5 Although the military museums located on Defence bases in Puckapunyal and Wodonga are open to the public, access can be difficult due to security requirements. The committee notes the evidence from Mitchell Shire Council that there has been some discussion about relocating the Army Tank and Artillery Museum to the edge of the Puckapunyal Military Area by 2022 in order to facilitate easier community access.

4.6 The committee notes evidence from witnesses suggesting that the Australian Army Infantry Museum (AAIM) in Singleton, New South Wales is now more easily accessible to the community and that this may be a model that could be considered for the relocation or upgrade of other military museums. The committee understands that following the reopening of the AAIM on a new site in August 2012, visitor numbers increased.

Recommendation 1

4.7 The committee recommends that Defence review the accessibility of military museums located within Defence bases and investigate options to improve access and increase visitor numbers.

4.8 With respect to the Puckapunyal Military Area, the committee received evidence that civilian members of the community have reported difficulties accessing the base for routine matters, such as family visits and children's social events. The committee notes that Defence could consider tailored security arrangements for local

residents to facilitate access and community interaction as well as establishing a register of local contractors to streamline the process for delivery of goods to the base.

Recommendation 2

4.9 The committee recommends that Defence investigate the feasibility of introducing tailored security arrangements to facilitate streamlined access to the Puckapunyal Military Area in limited circumstances.

Communication and engagement

4.10 Similar to previous public hearings, the committee received evidence about communication and engagement channels that are working effectively and others that require improvement.

4.11 Witnesses in Bendigo and Wodonga emphasised that the effectiveness of a collaborative relationship between Defence and the local community is heavily reliant on the individual base commandant stationed at the time. The committee heard examples of positive engagement with the commandant which has resulted in benefits for both Defence and the local community. Concerns were raised with the committee should a base commandant be less engaged with the local council and the broader community more generally.

4.12 The committee feels it would be advantageous to further consider the engagement between the base commandant and the local community and whether it may be appropriate for a standard set of requirements of community engagement to be established. The committee will consider this matter in more detail for its final report.

4.13 Given the long standing presence of Defence facilities in the Bendigo and Wodonga regions, the committee was surprised that there is not an existing, established communication mechanism between Defence and the local Regional Development Australia (RDA) offices. The committee notes that representatives from the two RDAs that appeared at hearings in Victoria recognised that their organisation could establish a liaison or broker role to facilitate better communication between Defence and local business and community representatives.

4.14 It is the view of the committee that RDAs could seek to build closer partnerships with Defence and Tier 1 contractors, and consider how to support local businesses to tender for Defence work.

4.15 With respect to emergency management, the committee notes the existing consultative forums comprising representatives from Defence, local councils and emergency services. Evidence provided to the inquiry suggests that these forums are working effectively and may offer a model of collaboration that could be used for other issues such as exploring business opportunities and engaging small and medium enterprises.

Recommendation 3

4.16 The committee recommends that Defence, in consultation with local councils, reviews its existing regional communication mechanisms with a view to establish a regular forum to facilitate discussion about Defence activities and potential business opportunities in the region.

Payment System

4.17 Evidence to the committee highlighted the challenges experienced by some businesses to be paid for work undertaken for Defence contracts, particularly with respect to work undertaken for Tier 1 contractors. Businesses had positive experiences with the payment system used by Defence but reported challenges with payment systems used by prime contractors which often led to payment delays.

4.18 In order to improve the experience of businesses undertaking Defence work, consistency in the method of payment would be beneficial.

Recommendation 4

4.19 The committee recommends that Defence consider requiring, through an additional provision in Base Services contracts, Tier 1 contractors to use a payment system similar to the system currently used by Defence.

Defence expenditure in the local area and visibility of local procurement

4.20 As with previous interim reports, the committee sought information from Defence about quantifying the goods and services that Defence source locally and whether Defence measures the regional impact from activities undertaken at Defence bases.

4.21 In follow up to questions raised at the Victorian hearings, Defence was able to provide some information about what products and services are provided to Defence bases using local suppliers.

4.22 The committee notes that detailed information about the regional impact of Defence activities is not readily available. It is the view of the committee that the provision of detailed information about what goods and services are sourced locally and the broader regional impact of Defence presence in the community would be of great benefit. The committee has made a recommendation on this matter in each interim report and will give this issue further consideration in its final report.

Recommendation 5

4.23 The committee recommends that Defence make information available to local communities about Defence expenditure in the respective area.

Conclusion

4.24 In conducting its inquiry, the committee has held public hearings in South Australia, Queensland, Northern Territory and Victoria. The evidence received at these hearings, combined with the written submissions, has demonstrated some similarities and equally, shown a variation in experiences both within and between jurisdictions.

4.25 Of interest to the committee is that the length of time of Defence presence in a particular region was not necessarily a determining factor for the presence of established and well-functioning communication mechanisms in the local community.

4.26 In order to examine the systemic issues highlighted throughout the inquiry, the committee will hold a final public hearing with Defence early in 2018. This will

enable a closer examination of the evidence presented to the committee and inform the committee's final report.

Senator Alex Gallacher

Chair