

Vaughan Gething AC/AM
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Iechyd a Gwasanaethau
Cymdeithasol
Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Services



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref MA-P-VG-2831-18

Bethan Sayed AM
Assembly Member for South Wales West
The National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

20 August 2018

Dear Bethan,

I am writing to you regarding the issue you raised with the Leader of the House on 17 July on behalf of 65 Degrees North about veterans' mental health.

I am aware of your association with 65 Degrees North from your sponsorship of the Senedd event in support of the first amputee to cross the Greenland ice cap in 2015. I commend the good work they do in offering 'peer-to peer' support for wounded veterans by providing opportunities for them to challenge themselves.

I note 65 Degrees North's comments about veteran suicide rates. We have to be cautious of press articles which suggest the suicide rate amongst veterans is higher than those that died in conflict or higher than that of the general public. Research undertaken by the University of Glasgow (published in Occupational Medicine, May 2017) shows those who have served in the armed forces in the past 50 years are at no greater risk of suicide than those who have not. Previous Ministry of Defence research has also suggested that, of those veterans who served in the Falklands campaign, fewer than would have been expected committed suicide, when compared to the general population.

This is echoed by the Royal British Legion, which in its UK Household Survey of the ex-Service Community seeks to disavow the 'pervading myth' that veterans are 'mad, bad and sad' i.e. suffering mental health problems, in prison, sleeping rough or suicidal. They maintain this myth may also be harmful to the veteran population by harming employment prospects and diverting resources away from genuine problems. Many veterans view their time in the Armed Forces with pride and the majority transition into civilian life with no problems.

That being said, any suicide is a tragedy. We owe our veterans a debt of gratitude and a duty of care, particularly when they develop health problems as a result of their military service. That is why *Taking Wales Forward*, our five-year strategic plan setting out what we want to deliver over the course of 2016 to 2021, includes a specific commitment to meet the

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

healthcare needs of our veterans. Furthermore, meeting the mental health needs of all our citizens is a priority area in the national strategy - *Prosperity for All*.

In Wales, we can be proud of our work with Veterans' NHS Wales. This is a unique service; the only national service of its kind in the UK. Each health board has appointed experienced mental health clinicians as Veterans Therapists with an interest in, or experience of, military health problems who offer a range of NICE approved evidence based psychological therapies on-site for a range of common mental health problems to improve the mental health and wellbeing of veterans in Wales. The service has established an integrated care pathway, joining up statutory and non-statutory sectors and acting as a single point of referral.

The Welsh Government has funded Veterans' NHS Wales since it was set up in 2010. An additional £100,000 recurrent funding from April 2018, bringing total funding to almost £700,000 per year, has enabled Veterans' NHS Wales' to increase capacity, allowing more veterans to get access to expert opinion and treatment. It also gives veterans and referrers increased contact with the service, allowing a more rapid response, expediting the referral to assessment time. Funding has facilitated a closer working relationship with Change Step Peer Supporters in six health boards. This pioneering new partnership between Veterans NHS Wales and Change Step means the psychological therapy provided by Veterans' NHS Wales is augmented by individual, peer mentoring support. This will help to ensure that the benefits of this therapy are maintained long-term.

Whilst the majority of referrals come from primary care, Veterans' NHS Wales operates an open access policy, accepting referrals from veterans themselves and referrals made on their behalf from family members, statutory and non-statutory services. The ability to self refer is seen as a contributing factor to the success of Veterans' NHS Wales. The Public Health Wales Review of the Veterans' NHS Wales service found that in focus groups, veterans unanimously supported an open access referral process, seeing it as critical. They also highlighted the importance of families and peers being able to refer veterans on the basis that families and other veterans will often be more aware that a veteran is struggling rather than the veteran themselves.

Veterans' NHS Wales is also leading research into Modular Motion-assisted Memory Desensitisation and Reconsolidation (3MDR), which is investigating whether this therapy can reduce symptoms of PTSD in treatment resistant military veterans and whether it is acceptable to them. By making use of talking therapies and virtual reality techniques the trials help veterans deal with personal trauma caused by their Service experience.

The work of 65 Degrees North aligns with wider initiatives to offer non-clinical support for people with mental health problems. We are now funding third sector organisations to deliver social prescribing pilots for mental health. These projects aim to trial new approaches to social prescribing, and link people to sources of community support, helping them to improve and manage their mental health and wellbeing.

More generally we remain determined to reduce suicide rates by further promoting, coordinating and supporting the plans and programmes that can help prevent and reduce suicidal behaviours. *Talk to Me 2*, our national action plan to tackle suicide and self-harm has the overall strategic aim to prevent and reduce the suicide and self harm rate in the general population in Wales. It will promote, coordinate and support plans and programmes for the prevention and reduction of suicidal behaviours and self-harm at the national, regional and local levels in the period up to 2019.

Anyone experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm can phone the Welsh Government funded free Community Advice and Listening Line C.A.L.L helpline on 0800 132 737 (or text

'help' to text 81066) or the Samaritans on 116 123. Veterans can also get specific support and advice on a range of issues affecting them, including mental well-being, through the Veterans Gateway, which went live in Wales in April 2017. Veterans' Gateway is a consortium of organisations and Armed Forces charities as first point of contact for whatever support they need. They work with veterans on a one-to-one basis, to connect them to the right support as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vaughan Gething". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Vaughan Gething AC/AM

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