

He waka eke noa | Stronger Together

A national system for the wellbeing and readiness of Aotearoa New Zealand's Defence, veteran and emergency service communities

KEY MESSAGE: Aotearoa New Zealand has substantial capability, commitment and community-led support for service communities. The opportunity gap is that no enduring mechanism is accountable for whether these efforts operate as a coherent national system or strengthen readiness.

Context - Aotearoa New Zealand is investing in defence, national security, policing, emergency response and resilience. Those investments will not deliver their full value unless personnel, volunteers and whānau remain healthy, trusted, available and supported across service, transition and later post-service life. The time is right to strengthen readiness, accountability and reciprocity before workforce and volunteer pressures become harder and more costly to reverse.

Analysis - An independent sector needs assessment combined a sector consultation with surveying and two forums involving the independent voices of 140 individuals from 35 organisations with a rapid and desktop review of 174 New Zealand-specific research, policy, strategy, legislative, framework, evaluation and report sources; a map of 100 publicly visible organisations, programmes and services.

- Consultation participants described committed people and valuable initiatives, but repeatedly identified fragmented funding, inconsistent data, inequitable access, difficult transitions, organisational pressures, whānau strain and volunteer sustainability.
- The desktop review identified substantial activity but no enduring steward, shared outcomes, financial visibility, common data standards or independent evaluation infrastructure spanning the whole system.
- The authors conclude that this fragmentation affects more than wellbeing: it limits government's ability to assess value, target investment and protect recruitment, retention, availability, service continuity and surge capacity.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 - Establish an independent national stewardship function. The New Zealand Government should establish an enduring, independent and publicly accountable national stewardship function, preferably a body such as an independent Crown entity established through legislation, to provide national strategy, shared outcomes, financial visibility, cross-agency coordination, equity assurance, public reporting and advice to Ministers. Māori, current and former personnel, volunteers, whānau and lived-experience leaders must hold protected, remunerated roles in governance and priority setting, with power to influence agendas rather than only comment on completed decisions.

Recommendation 2 - Establish a national centre of excellence. The New Zealand Government should establish a scientifically and evaluatively independent centre of excellence to maintain the sector evidence base, develop common data and financial-mapping standards, evaluate programmes, and mobilise knowledge into policy and operational practice. Lived experience should be embedded across the full evidence cycle, from setting priorities and defining meaningful outcomes to interpreting findings, co-designing tools, supporting implementation and judging whether change is useful in real service settings.

Functions first, form second. Government should agree the required functions, then test institutional options against independence, authority, durability, Te Tiriti partnership, data access, cost, avoidance of duplication and public accountability. The assessment considers an independent Crown entity the strongest model for stewardship, while recognising that the final form is a matter for government.

Action sought from Ministers

- **Note** the findings and the system strengths on which reform can build.
- **Agree in principle** that officials should explore options for the two national functions.
- **Commission** a report-back with costed statutory and interim options, implementation sequencing, fiscal and legislative implications, agency roles, Te Tiriti partnership and consultation requirements.

EVIDENCE NOTE: This is an applied, multi-source assessment, not a statistically representative population study, complete service directory, systematic review or costed institutional proposal. Coverage is uneven, but multiple sources converge on the same structural finding. Costed options and fiscal treatment should be developed through the proposed officials' report-back.

Questions about the independent sector needs assessment can be directed to Dr Henry Bowen via email at research@mesha.org.au.