



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

Improving service delivery: the Veterans Agency

**Twentieth Report of
Session 2003–04**



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Session 2003–04**

*Report, together with formal minutes,
oral and written evidence*

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Nick Wright (Clerk), Christine Randall (Committee Assistant), Leslie Young (Committee Assistant), and Ronnie Jefferson (Secretary).

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Summary

Introduction

The Veterans Agency, an Executive Agency of the Ministry of Defence, is responsible for administering the War Pensions Scheme. The Agency's caseload is generated by claims for war disablement pensions, widows' pensions, gratuities and allowances paid under the Scheme. The number of claims received by the Agency has decreased and is expected to fall further. In 1992–93 the Agency received 202,828 claims but by 2001–02 this had fallen to 48,950, split equally between claims for war pensions and allowances. The number of beneficiaries of the Scheme, however, at around 271,000, is similar to what it was ten years ago, and total expenditure on awards has risen from £840 million in 1992–93 to £1,200 million annually. The Agency is also responsible for the War Pensioners' Welfare Service, which provides support to recently bereaved widows and war pensioners, and maintains links with other organisations in the health, voluntary and ex-Service sectors (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Service delivered by the Veterans Agency

Administration of the War Pensions Scheme	– Provide financial and welfare support to 220,835 ex-service people and 50,157 dependants resident in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and abroad in 2001–02.
Administration of appeals against decisions on war pensions	– Claimants may appeal either against the Agency's decision not to award a pension or allowance (an entitlement appeal) or against the level set by the Agency (an assessment appeal). In 2001–02, 5,115 appeals were lodged by claimants.
Welfare Services	– The Welfare Service provides advice, guidance and practical help to war pensioners, war widows and war widowers, dependants and other veterans by facilitating clients' access to any service that will meet their welfare needs.

Source: C&AG's Report

On the basis of a Report from the Comptroller and Auditor General¹ we examined the Agency's progress in improving its service delivery, in particular its performance in dealing with war pensions claims, what it is doing to modernise and improve the efficiency of its processes, and how it reaches veterans who may be entitled to use its services.

¹ C&AG's Report, *Improving service delivery: the Veterans' Agency* (HC 522, Session 2002–03)

Conclusions and recommendations

- 1. The Agency has estimated that the potential population of veterans and dependants is between four and five million, yet it has little idea of how many might reasonably be eligible for a pension or an award.** While many ex-servicemen and women will have completed military careers without incident, and will have no call upon the Agency's services, there may be others in need of help. The Agency needs to define better the target population within the wider body of ex-servicemen and women as a starting point to assess how many other potential beneficiaries there may be, in addition to the 271,000 already in receipt of assistance.
- 2. The Agency should collate and analyse information about the composition of existing client and claimant groups to establish how representative they are of the wider population of ex-service personnel.** The Agency puts significant effort into the services it provides to its existing beneficiaries, yet it does not know how they are distributed geographically, the propensity of different services to make claims and whether for example officers are more likely to be recipients of benefits under the War Pensions Scheme than other ex-servicemen and women. The Agency needs to understand how representative existing claimants are to identify gaps in its promotional activities and take steps to raise the profile of its services among those who may otherwise remain unaware.
- 3. Despite considerable efforts to raise awareness of its services, the Agency is unlikely to reach veterans who have not kept in touch with the ex-service community.** Much of the agency's promotional activity is channelled through ex-service organisations. The Agency needs to devise new and complementary strategies to reach that wider body of ex-service men and women who do not have contact with the ex-service organisations. The Agency could, for example, undertake surveys of pensioners in general to clarify awareness of the Agency and to determine whether some groups of veterans are under-represented.
- 4. It took the Agency an average of 131 days in 2001–02 to clear a first claim for a war disablement pension.** This is as a result of the need to gain information from a succession of bodies in a process which is complicated and vulnerable to cumulative delays. Currently there is little incentive for the Agency to improve its performance in processing first claims for a war disablement pension, because it is set a single target for clearing all types of claim—whether complicated or straightforward—which it has easily achieved in recent years. The Ministry and the Agency should agree much more specific and demanding targets, particularly for first claims, to drive down lengthy waiting times for claimants.
- 5. Now that the Ministry of Defence has responsibility for the Agency it should improve communication and routinely provide service records within the agreed turnaround time.** The Agency has an agreement with the Ministry that service records will be provided in 20 working days and yet in 2001–02 over one quarter of records were not received after 25 working days. The Agency and the Ministry of Defence should identify the causes of the present delays, tackle any persistent hold-

ups or bottlenecks, and take action to speed up the process generally so that agreed targets for the supply of service records are met.

6. **The Agency needs to focus on those hospitals which consistently fail to meet the ten day turnaround target agreed with the Department of Health for the provision of medical records from the National Health Service.** The Agency has an agreement with the Department of Health for hospital case notes to be supplied within ten working days and many hospitals achieve this target. On average, however, the Agency has to wait 24 working days for hospital case notes and 38 working days for reports from General Practitioners. These waiting times have a direct impact on how long it takes the Agency to clear claims.
7. **As soon as the technology is available, the Agency should exploit the benefits offered by use of NHS Net**—the National Health Service’s own data network—to reduce waiting times generally for medical records, and reduce administrative costs in turn.
8. **The Agency should develop indicators which cover the unit costs of processing claims and the productivity of staff dealing with them.** Despite a recommendation by this Committee in 1993, the Agency still does not monitor the cost of processing a claim and is therefore not in a position to identify where improvements in efficiency are needed and how it can deploy better its resources in dealing with different types of claims.
9. **The Agency currently has two computer systems which are unable to communicate with each other: one to access pensioners’ details for its Welfare Service and the other to maintain records of its claims processing.** As the Agency takes forward plans to replace these systems, it should take careful account of the findings of this Committee and the work of the Office of Government Commerce so that it does not repeat the failings which have been common to Government IT projects in recent years.
10. **The Agency should take steps to benchmark the efficiency and performance of its call centre,** taking account of our Report, *Better public services through call centres.*² The Agency’s helpline handled 418,284 calls from existing and potential claimants in 2001 yet over 11% of these were lost calls. The Agency should familiarise itself with sources of good practice as a means to assess and improve its own performance.
11. **In the light of the long and distinguished service given by the Brigade of Gurkhas to the British Armed Forces, we urge the Agency and the Ministry of Defence to resolve promptly the uncertainty regarding eligibility of Gurkhas under the War Pensions Scheme.** It is now seven years since the move of the Brigade from Hong Kong to the United Kingdom and yet it has still not been clarified as to how this move affects their eligibility under the Scheme.

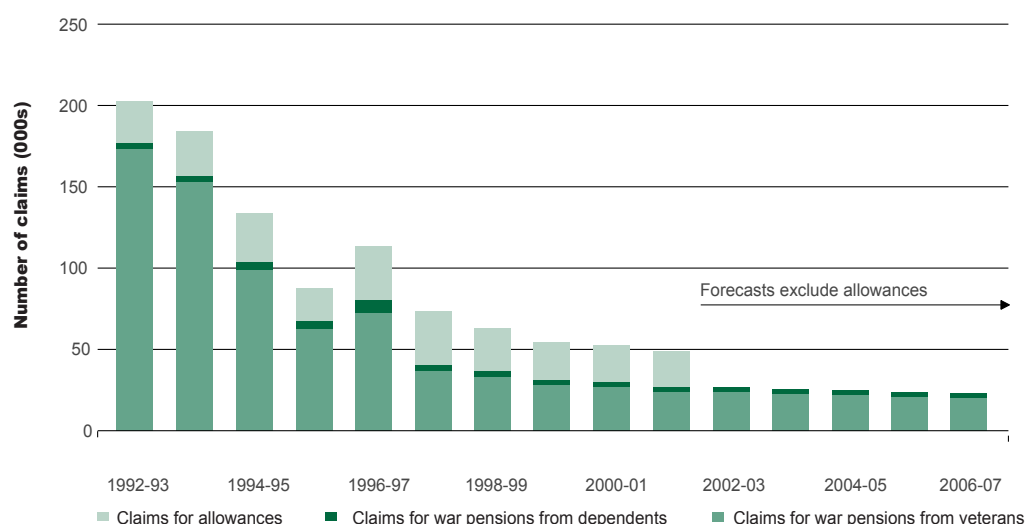
² 20th Report from the Committee of Public Accounts, *Better public services through call centres* (HC 373, Session 2002–03)

1 The Agency's performance in dealing with claims for war pensions

1. The Veterans Agency was established in April 2002.³ It delivers services to people who are disabled or bereaved as a result of military service and who may be entitled to a war pension or other awards. Any condition causing disablement which results from military service may qualify for consideration for a war pension, not just injuries or death arising from enemy action. Claims can therefore arise many years after service has ceased, for example for arthritis, and range from injuries received during conflict, training or organised sports and for illnesses that were caused, or made worse, by service.

2. The number of claims received by the Agency has reduced significantly over the last ten years with the trend set to continue. In 1992–93 the Agency received 202,828 claims. This had fallen to 133,452 in 1994–95 and by 2001–02 the figure had reduced further to 48,950 (a decrease of 153,878 over the nine years). The number of claims received is expected to fall further⁴ (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2: The total number of claims received by the Agency has decreased



Source: Veterans Agency and Defence Analytical Services Agency (C&AG's Report, Figure 8, p17)

The time it takes to clear claims

3. In 2001–02, it took the Agency on average 131 days to clear a first claim for a war disablement pension, although the average clearance time for all claims was 73 working days.⁵ Much of this time was spent assembling the evidence needed to enable the Agency to make a decision on a claim, for instance securing evidence from General Practitioners, hospital case notes or commissioning of medical examinations, and establishing details of military service by obtaining service records from the Ministry of Defence.

³ The War Pensions Agency was established as an Executive Agency of the Department of Social Security in April 1994. It was transferred to the Ministry of Defence in June 2001 and was renamed the Veterans Agency in April 2002.

⁴ C&AG's Report, paras 15, 1.13

⁵ *ibid*, para 2.3

4. The Agency has an agreement with the Department of Health for hospital case notes to be supplied within ten working days. The Agency waits, however, an average of 24 working days for hospital case notes and 38 working days for reports from General Practitioners.⁶ The Agency put delays in getting records promptly down to a lack of resources in hospital records department who faced continual demands for records for immediate clinical purposes against which the Agency had to compete. Many hospitals achieved the ten day turnaround target and the Agency reminded those that did not of their responsibilities by writing to hospitals and Chief Executives of NHS trusts.⁷

5. The Agency has an agreement with the Ministry to obtain service records within 20 working days; and yet in 2001–02 over a quarter were not provided within 25 working days.⁸ Since its transfer to the Ministry the Agency had increased the level of liaison with those responsible for service records and held regular meetings with them to make sure it was providing accurate information to enable its requests for records to be met, and to identify any particular problem areas relating to services. The Agency could not, however, say definitely when the 20 day agreed turnaround time would be met.⁹

The Agency's targets

6. The Agency cleared claims in an average of 73 working days in 2001–02, comfortably outperforming its target of 90 working days. In 2002–03 this figure was reduced to 82 working days¹⁰—a target that had therefore already been met and indeed exceeded the previous year. Similarly the Agency achieved 135 working days in 2001–02 for stage 1 of the appeals process¹¹ against a target of 195 working days—and yet its target for the following year was to clear appeals in an average of 175 working days.¹² While targets could have been more demanding and had been easily achieved, the Agency continued to strive to operate as quickly as possible irrespective of meeting its targets. The Agency was also concerned with other measures of quality in addition to clearance times, such as improving the quality of the Agency's communication with its customers.¹³

Productivity

7. The main costs involved in processing claims and appeals relate to staff and overheads (such as utilities, IT and maintenance). The Agency does not, however, specifically monitor the cost of processing a claim or the productivity of staff in dealing with them,¹⁴ although we recommended in an earlier report that these should be monitored.¹⁵

6 C&AG's Report, para 2.7; Q 53

7 Qq 54–55

8 C&AG's Report, para 2.6

9 Qq 71–74

10 C&AG's Report, para 2.2

11 Stage 1 of the appeals process is the time the case is with the Agency before referral to the Court Service.

12 C&AG's Report, paras 2.26, 2.28

13 Q 9

14 C&AG's Report, para 2.11

15 27th Report from the Committee of Public Accounts, *Quality of Service: War Pensions, Mobility Allowance, Attendance Allowance and Invalid Care Allowance* (HC 339, Session 1992–93)

8. Although it faced difficulties in separating out costs for different types of claims, the Agency had now begun to generate unit costings covering the main areas of its business such as disablement claims or claims for war widows pensions. It recognised that it needed to develop further its management information to be in a position to identify improvements in efficiency and to better deploy its resources in dealing with different types of claims.¹⁶

2 Modernising the Agency's processes

The Agency's own record keeping

9. The Agency's casework on claims is entirely paper based and files are moved frequently depending on the stage in the process a claim has reached.¹⁷ The Agency maintains two computer systems which cannot communicate with each other—its War Pensions Computer and its standalone Welfare Service system.¹⁸ The paper based nature of the Agency's operations and the maintenance of these systems together represent a significant impediment to long-term real improvements in the Agency's customer service and efficiency.¹⁹ The Agency was preparing a preliminary business case for investment in IT systems which would deliver improvements in customer service and efficiency. It expected its preliminary business case to be completed by December 2003, taking account of implementation of a similar electronic system developed in Australia and with advice from the Ministry of Defence. Asked about what advice it was seeking to manage the project the Agency said that it would be working closely with those who manage IT development within the Ministry of Defence.²⁰

External validation of medical decision-making

10. The level at which war pensions payments are set is determined by the level of disablement of claimants assessed by the Agency's doctors.²¹ Assessments of eligibility for awards and the level of disablement are made by the Agency's medical team supported by lay staff, informed by medical examinations carried out by Schlumberger, a private sector company, on behalf of the Agency.²²

11. Arrangements for checking the quality of the Agency's medical decision-making consists of peer review by the Agency's medical service and a degree of external checking, introduced in April 2001, by the Ministry of Defence to provide independent validation of the quality monitoring system. Although some 4% of medical decisions were found to be of unacceptable quality from its sample of checks, the pension awarded is not changed unless the assessment has been made in the absence of a material fact.²³

17 C&AG's Report, para 2.21

18 Q 192

19 Q 82

20 Qq 83, 192–193

21 C&AG's Report, Figure 6

22 Qq 109–111

23 Q 39

NHS Net

12. The Agency has considered the potential benefits of using NHS Net, the National Health Service's own data network, that would enable it to access General Practitioner and hospital records electronically. It had not yet quantified the benefits although the potential savings for the Agency and its clients could be significant in terms of reduced waiting times for medical records and reduced administration costs, with concurrent savings for the National Health Service.²⁴ The Agency had reached agreement with the NHS Information Authority to have the same level of access to patient records that clinicians would have, and expected to have access to these records as soon as they were available on-line.²⁵ The Agency hoped that this would make the access to veterans medical records almost instantaneous, although only new patient records would be placed on NHS Net and sometimes the Agency needed older information.²⁶

The Agency's helpline

13. The Agency operates a freephone helpline which handled 418,284 calls in 2001²⁷ of which 11.4% were lost calls.²⁸ The Agency admitted that it was unaware that this compared poorly with standards in the insurance industry, and was also unaware of how its performance compared to other government call centres and the recommendations of our own report on the subject.²⁹ Since its call centre is small the Agency said it was difficult to match the number of people working to the volume of calls received, but when faced with additional demand such as the major announcement on ex-gratia payments for Far Eastern Prisoners of War, the Agency was in a position to double its capacity to match the increased volume of calls expected.³⁰ The Agency also sought to broadcast its freephone number widely so that the general public could call to find out about entitlements to awards.

24 C&AG's Report, para 2.7

25 Qq 75–76

26 Qq 78–79

27 C&AG's Report, para 2.45

28 Q 103; Lost calls are where a caller either discontinues after hearing the ring tone or does not speak to anyone during the call.

29 20th Report from the Committee of Public Accounts, *Better public services through call centres* (HC 373, Session 2002–03)

30 Q 105

3 Reaching veterans entitled to use the Agency's services

14. The definition of entitlement to an award under the War Pensions Scheme is very wide.³¹ Awards are made for disablement arising from, or made worse by, injury or illness due to factors of service, whether in peacetime or war. These include injuries or illnesses that can arise many years after service has ended, such as arthritis.³² The Agency does not, however, collate data which separates out how many claims have arisen from conflicts, training or other activities.³³ Under the standard of proof in the War Pensions Scheme, if a veteran makes a claim within seven years of termination of service, the Agency has to prove beyond reasonable doubt that there is no link between his claimed condition and service by assembling evidence. For later claims, the onus is on the claimant to raise a reasonable doubt. Once reasonable doubt is raised, the benefit of that doubt is given to the claimant.³⁴ 70% of claims for disablement pensions are made at least three years after personnel have left the services, and the bulk of first claims are made after 27 years, and relate to World War Two veterans.³⁵

Distribution of awards

15. The Agency has estimated that the total number of veterans and dependants is between four and five million, of whom some 271,000 are current beneficiaries of the War Pensions Scheme.³⁶ Each year, the Agency writes to all existing customers to remind them of the services available.³⁷ The Agency however, was less able to raise awareness amongst veterans who did not retain any kind of service link, for example through ex-service organisations such as the Royal British Legion.

16. The Agency relies mainly on the efforts of ex-service organisations such as the Royal British Legion to raise awareness about the services that it provides, and the entitlement to awards under the War Pensions Scheme. For example in its magazine the Royal British Legion sent out 600,000 copies of a leaflet detailing services available to veterans through the Agency's helpline,³⁸ and the Agency tracked how many people subsequently contacted it as a result of this mailshot.

17. The Agency can only assess entitlement to an award under the scheme once a claim has been received.³⁹ It does not, however, compile information on how claimants initially find out about the Agency. The Agency did not compile information on the breakdown of

31 Q 36

32 C&AG's Report, para 1 Executive Summary

33 Q 35

34 Q 89

35 C&AG's Report, Figure 34; Q 21

36 C&AG's Report, para 2.42

37 Q 151

38 Q 37

39 C&AG's Report, para 2.43

claims and awards between officers and other ranks, the distribution of awards across services and units, and how the geographical pattern of take up of awards matched the geographical pattern of recruitment.⁴⁰ Its computer system did, however, hold information on which services and units people had served in although the Agency did not extract these data and use them to monitor the incidence of claims from different services.⁴¹ The Agency said that such information was not relevant to resolving a claim, although it would be concerned if data suggested it was not getting its message across in respect of veterans from some services or in some parts of the country.⁴² Without such information the Agency is not in a position to determine whether it is administering the distribution of awards fairly and evenly as it does not know how those receiving awards compares with those who might be eligible.⁴³ It may, for instance, be receiving a disproportionately high number of claims from one part of the services compared to another or claimants from some parts of the country may be under-represented compared to the level of recruitment.⁴⁴

18. In a subsequent note the Agency set out the steps it has taken to raise awareness of the availability of war pensions and how its activities in this respect compared with other organisations internationally.⁴⁵ The note also detailed the action that it proposed to take to establish the awareness of veterans benefits amongst the public at large and to determine if there are particular groups or geographical locations which require specific targeting to assess whether there is a disproportionate lack of awareness of benefit entitlement in some areas. The note did not, however, offer any analysis of the make-up of the existing group of 271,000 beneficiaries, for example, the proportion of officers compared with other ranks, and how representative or otherwise existing claimants are compared with the wider body of ex-service personnel.⁴⁶

Treatment of non-United Kingdom nationals

19. The Agency did not know about the eligibility for war pensions of those who had served alongside British Forces or enlisted in the British Army. A subsequent submission⁴⁷ set out that the provisions of the War Pensions Scheme apply only to members of the military forces who had served in units which are based in the United Kingdom, excluding for example the Free French Forces. The Scheme does not include Nepalese citizens serving in the Brigade of Gurkhas as they were regarded as being recruited and serving overseas. Consideration is currently being given to whether the move of the Brigade of Gurkhas home base from Hong Kong to the United Kingdom in 1997 has altered the position regarding the eligibility of Gurkhas under the War Pension Scheme.

40 Qq 134–135

41 Qq 145–147

42 Qq 134, 137

43 Q 136

44 Q 137

45 Q 213; Ev 23–24 (ref. Q 186)

46 Qq 150, 157

47 Qq 176, 186; Ev 22–23 (ref. Q 176)

Gulf War Syndrome

20. The Agency assesses claims on the basis of conditions recognised in the World Health Organisation’s classification of diseases which had as yet not identified a condition described as Gulf War Syndrome.⁴⁸ Some claimants may use the term—and 138 had done so on their claim papers up to August 2003⁴⁹—and these claims are processed by the Agency in the same manner as any other claim.⁵⁰ All claims for disablement due to service can be assessed under the War Pensions Scheme,⁵¹ and around 90% of those who had applied for war pensions on the basis of a condition described as Gulf War Syndrome were in receipt of a war pension on the basis of other diagnostic classifications. A recent decision reached by a Pensions Appeal Tribunal had allowed the term “Gulf War Syndrome” to describe an individual’s accepted disablement, but the decision was related only to the labelling of that case.⁵²

21. The Agency told us that although the implications of the judgement were still under consideration,⁵³ if such a definition were to be introduced it would not have any effect on the disablement claims that were paid under the War Pensions Scheme⁵⁴ as awards under the Scheme are not paid according to diagnostic labels but on an assessed overall level of disablement.⁵⁵ The Agency could not say what the wider implications of the ruling were for compensation claims or civil cases of negligence, as its remit is limited to the War Pensions Scheme.⁵⁶

48 Q 18

49 Ev 22 (ref. Q 164)

50 Q 170

51 C&AG’s Report, para 1.21

52 Q 20

53 Q 162

54 Q 167

55 Ev 22 (ref. Q 164)

56 Qq 167–170

Formal minutes

Monday 26 April 2004

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Allan
Mr Richard Bacon
Jon Cruddas
Mr Ian Davidson
Mr Frank Field

Jim Sheridan
Mr Gerry Steinberg
Jon Trickett
Mr Alan Williams

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (Improving service delivery: the Veterans Agency), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 21 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Twentieth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 134 (Select Committees (Reports)) be applied to the Report.

Adjourned until Wednesday 28 April at 3.30 pm

Witnesses

Wednesday 17 September 2003

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Mr Alan Burnham, Dr Paul Kitchen, the Veterans Agency

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Fourth Report	Improving service delivery: the Forensic Science Service	HC 137	(Cm 6155)
Fifth Report	Warm Front: helping to combat fuel poverty	HC 206	(Cm 6175)
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Seventh Report	Progress on 15 major capital projects funded by Arts Council England	HC 253	(Cm 6155)
Eighth Report	The English national stadium project at Wembley	HC 254	(Cm 6155)
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The reference number of the Treasury Minute to each Report will be printed in brackets after the HC printing number