



Defence Force Remuneration Tribunal

STATEMENT

Defence Act 1903

s.58H—Functions and powers of Tribunal

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY: MARITIME SPIRITUAL WELLBEING OFFICER – REPORT BACK

(Matter 16 of 2024)

MS B O’NEILL, PRESIDENT

MAJGEN G FOGARTY AO RETD, MEMBER

CANBERRA, 26 NOVEMBER 2024

[1] This statement arises from a requirement, set by this Tribunal in Matter 6 of 2020 – Navy – Maritime Spiritual Wellbeing Officer¹ (MSWO) for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to report back to us with a final review of the implementation of the MSWO workforce. This report back should be read in conjunction with our decision in that matter.²

[2] The MSWO category was established in 2020 to provide Navy members and their families with appropriate wellbeing support, regardless of religious affiliation. The introduction of the category sought to assist Navy in meeting the objectives of the Defence Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2023³ by broadening mental health and wellbeing support options available to Navy members, including for those who do not seek spiritual and pastoral support from a Navy Chaplain because of their religious affiliation.

[3] The MSWO workforce is small, with 15 personnel (9 Permanent and 6 Reserve officers) within a workforce establishment, including Navy Chaplains, of 42 positions. MSWOs have taken up positions both ashore and at sea and, other than religious ministry and key religious leader engagement functions, perform all the roles and activities performed by Navy Chaplains.

[4] In 2020 we recognised the ‘*significant change in the religious landscape of the ADF*’.⁴ From the outset, we note the continuation of this change and that ‘*over 67 per cent of the permanent ADF have no religious affiliation*’ – an increase of 17 per cent from January 2020.⁵

[5] A prior report back on the MSWO workforce was received in December 2022 and considered by this Tribunal as part of the Annual Review of Determinations⁶ at that time. That report back, and this one, reviewed 5 key performance indicators (KPIs) including:

1. the attractiveness of the employment package being offered;
2. viability of the career profile and identification of issues relating to inclusiveness within the workforce;
3. analyse demand for MSWOs role in the mental health and wellbeing of ADF members and their families;
4. determine if the introduction of the MSWO is assisting Navy Chaplaincy Branch in meeting its current and future workforce needs; and
5. analyse if the introduction of the MSWO is supporting the changing spiritual diversity in Navy.

[6] With regard to the attractiveness of the MSWO offer, we are encouraged that Defence Force Recruiting have received 360 expressions of interest for the role. Of those who entered as an MSWO, 11 joined as ab-initio with 5 in-Service transfers. We note that interest in the Reserve MSWO exceeded that of the Permanent offer. We note the evidence that, because the MSWO capability remains ‘*relatively new*’ Navy has deliberately sought qualified and experienced personnel to support the establishment of the role and to ‘*ensure recruited MSWO had the capability to integrate into the Chaplaincy branch as quickly and seamlessly as possible*’.⁷ We note the anecdotal evidence provided which reports that ‘*ADF remuneration is significantly lower in comparison to civilian work, however the opportunity to serve and bring myself/contribute gives purpose/meaning to why I joined the ADF. I can imagine if recruiting professionals from allied health fields, there may be resistance in consideration of market remuneration*’.⁸ We note that while Navy recognises the need to build and sustain the workforce, it anticipates a ‘*low likelihood of future in-Service transfers*’ because members can only seek transfer ‘*if they already have acceptable education qualifications and pastoral care experience*’ which is likely to be difficult to achieve if they do not already have these before entering service.⁹

[7] For the second KPI we accept that, of the 11 MSWOs recruited to date, only 4 have served long enough to complete their initial minimum period of service of 3 years and, of those 4, all remain serving.¹⁰ We are encouraged that *‘MSWOs report satisfaction with their work and feel it is meaningful and engaging’* with workplaces *‘highly inclusive with Chaplains and MSWOs working as one team’*.¹¹ We note Navy acknowledges that progression for Reserve MSWOs *‘can be limited due to reduced opportunities to serve and train’* and that Navy will *‘monitor and seek to reduce barriers for career progression of Reserve MSWOs and Chaplains’* that *‘may include identifying pathways for progression that recognises both civilian and military experience’*.¹² Again, anecdotal evidence demonstrated *‘I do feel that those who have been involved directly thus far (including the Director General of Navy Chaplaincy) have supported me and the MSWO category consistently and with strength, understanding and tenacity’*.¹³

[8] To analyse demand for MSWOs in the mental health and wellbeing of ADF members, the ADF uses a ‘Chaplaincy Reporting Tool’ to capture data on interactions by category. This proved total individual MSWO interventions of over 15,000 in the pastoral care category and 2,600 in the spiritual care category. We note MSWO contribution to Navy capability has *‘included numerous interventions such as: advocating on behalf of a member to their Command which has stopped them from discharging; not discharging from service to continue training; and providing welfare support to a member struggling with suicide ideation’*.¹⁴ It is apparent to us that *‘while the MSWO workforce is small in number, demand for MSWO support is strong’*.¹⁵

[9] We acknowledge an overlap in KPIs 4 and 5 and accept there are no target quotas for specific religious denominations, with Chaplain candidates assessed equally on credentials and experience, while MSWOs have separate recruiting targets and assessment. From a current and future workforce requirement perspective, we note that *‘while Christian affiliated Chaplains have seen a small growth in total number’*¹⁶ the introduction of MSWO, and imperative to recruit other non-Christian faith-based Chaplains, has increased the Navy Chaplaincy Branch diversity and broadened support options for uniformed members and their families.

[10] It is apparent that MSWOs have integrated into the Chaplain capability and taken on the same non-religious roles including pastoral care and spiritual support and ceremonies. We acknowledge that Navy has found that MSWOs *‘with appropriate pastoral experience and a mature worldview deliver a similar chaplaincy effect to religious Chaplains’*.¹⁷

[11] We thank the ADF for the depth of reporting and agree the introduction of the MSWO has broadened the diversity within Navy Chaplaincy and, while Chaplains continue to play a vital role, the MSWO provides a complementary non-religious alternative in support of the mental health and wellbeing of Navy people and their families.

MS B O'NEILL, PRESIDENT
MAJGEN G FOGARTY AO RETD, MEMBER

¹ <https://www.dfrt.gov.au/matters/navy-maritime-spiritual-wellbeing-officer>

² <https://www.dfrt.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-04/Decision%20-%20MSWO.pdf>

³ https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-09/Defence_Mental_Health_Wellbeing_Strategy_2018-2023_0.PDF

⁴ <https://www.dfrt.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-04/Decision%20-%20MSWO.pdf> paragraph 6.

⁵ ADF submission Maritime Spiritual Wellbeing Officer- Report Back dated 17 October page 18 paragraph 2.45.

⁶ <https://www.dfrt.gov.au/matters/annual-review-determinations-2022>

⁷ October 2024 submission page 5 paragraph 2.11.

⁸ ADF Report Back 31 December 2022 Annexure .A

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ October 2024 page 9 paragraph 2.20.

¹¹ Ibid page 9 paragraph 2.2.3

¹² Ibid page 10 paragraph 2.25.

¹³ Report Back 31 December 2022 Annexure A.

¹⁴ October 2024 submission page 13 paragraph 2.32.

¹⁵ Ibid page 13 paragraph 2.32.

¹⁶ Ibid page 15 paragraph 2.40.

¹⁷ Ibid page 2 paragraph 2.3.