



31 July 2023

Re: Notification of DFA entering caretaker arrangements

Dear stakeholders

We write to inform you that Defence Families of Australia (DFA) will be entering a period of caretaker arrangements effective 2 August 2023.

These arrangements coincide with the resignation of the inaugural Defence Family Advocate, Sandi Laaksonen-Sherrin, and the Deputy Advocate, Gabrielle Sasse. Sandi has led the DFA team since 2021, through a period of great uncertainty for the organisation and Defence community overall. We will miss her leadership but wish her all the best in welcoming her new baby. Gabrielle is the longest serving appointee at DFA, and we wish her all the best for her next steps.

As the Ministerially appointed group representing the interests of the families of current serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members since 1986, DFA are the official advisors to Government and the Department of Defence and the voice of over 84,000 families posted across Australia and internationally¹. We advocate for ongoing improvement in policy and practical support. Our aim is to reduce the negative impacts of military service on ADF families, and to support the positive aspects of this unique Defence lifestyle. Over the last 12 months Sandi and Gabrielle have led the DFA team to achieve over 80 advocacy goals to improve aspects of Defence life for families. For a summary of these please refer to the DFA Advocacy Map reports available at: <https://dfa.org.au/advocacy-map/>.

In recent years, the Australian Defence community faces the biggest set of stressors in a generation. For many Defence families we have enabled our loved ones' military service to support responses to bushfires, Covid Assist, the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, severe staff shortages, and the evacuation from Afghanistan, let alone home schooling and increased isolation from our extended families in many cases. The workforce crisis acknowledged by Government further adds stress to our ADF families. The whole country is carrying more than normal on their shoulders, but many Defence families bear additional weight. So DFA's work is more important than ever.

While we will never remove all the potential hurdles or challenges that a Defence family may face due to the nature of military service, Australia could and should seek to (i) reduce how often those hurdles arise, (ii) how high they are, and (iii) how families are supported to leap them and continue their journey. If we do not act to appropriately consider and enable the family unit, it is possible that the next Royal Commission will be investigating Defence liability for avoidable family impacts.

DFA operations will be reduced during the caretaker period. The length of this period will be determined by the recruitment process for the next Defence Family Advocate of Australia, which is

¹ For more information on Defence Families of Australia (DFA), visit: <https://dfa.org.au/>



supported by the Department of Defence. DFA require this role to be recruited to in a fulltime capacity to meet the needs of the Defence community at this critical time, and to appropriately recognise the requirements and contributions of this role.

If you would like an update on this process or would like to request DFA action in upcoming months, please contact advocacy@dfa.org.au.

For a summary of caretaker arrangements please see Attachment A, below.

The DFA team looks forward to welcoming a new Defence Family Advocate in upcoming months, and to continuing to work with you to ensure the family perspective and impacts are addressed in good policy and practice.

Kind regards,

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Attachment A – Defence Families Australia Caretaker Arrangements

Summary

Due to delays in the recruitment of a Defence Family Advocate (Advocate), the head of Defence Families of Australia (DFA), DFA will be entering a period of caretaker arrangements for an unknown length of time from 2 August 2023. This has been a longstanding end date for Sandi to focus on the arrival of her new baby². The below arrangements ensure that the DFA team can continue the minimum required core operations until a suitable incumbent for the Advocate commences.

DFA is the official advisory body for Government and Defence for matters pertaining to ADF families. DFA is an official avenue of redress (through warm referral to relevant escalation points or support services) and feedback for over 84,000 families of ADF members (SERCATs 3-7). At a time of significant change and stress for the Defence community, the effective functioning of this resource is critical.

Duties and Responsibilities:

1. Core functions operating at **reduced** capacity during caretaker period:
 - DFA Governance Reform and change management;
 - Finance and budget management;
 - Reporting (e.g. DFA Advocacy Map);
 - Day-to-day management of Delegate team, advocacy strategy, triage and escalation;
 - Implementation of DFA Strategic Plan 2022-2024;
 - Communications and marketing;
 - Human resources relating to recruitment, training and development, staff management and delegation;
 - Representation of current serving ADF members and their families at the regional, national and international level as required;
 - Escalation for advocacy topics from the regional to national level, including oversight of policy implications;

2. Core functions which will be **paused** during caretaker period:
 - Senior stakeholder liaison with Government, Defence and Executive level stakeholders within Defence and across the Defence support sector. Priority given to Minister for Defence Personnel and Chief of the Defence Force.
 - Providing the family perspective on National working groups, committees and Command courses. Representation on 75% of these groups will be paused during the caretaker period. Priority is given to current policy development groups and the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.
 - Annual or periodic briefings to key stakeholder groups, the XO/CO courses and Defence schools will also cease during this period.
 - Representation of ADF families posted overseas is led by the Advocate and will be paused.
 - Response to quick turnaround requests for information from Government and Defence.

² Note, the governance of Defence Families of Australia does not currently provide leave entitlements to any staff.