Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the Defence and Veterans' Service Commissioner Bill 2025 and Defence and Veterans' Service Commissioner (Consequential and Transitional Provisions) Bill 2025

Submitted by:
Veteran Support Force LTD
Heston Russell
Founder / Managing Director
Date: 16 February 2026

1. Executive Summary

Veteran Support Force (VSF) supports the establishment of an independent Defence and Veterans' Service Commissioner as proposed in the Defence and Veterans' Service Commissioner Bill 2025. The creation of a standalone statutory office with systemic oversight functions represents a significant opportunity to strengthen public confidence in Defence and veteran wellbeing oversight arrangements, particularly in the context of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

VSF supports the intent of the Bill. However, its effectiveness will depend on structural safeguards that ensure genuine independence, transparency, and operational credibility.

2. Background and Standing

Veteran Support Force Ltd is a not-for-profit organisation focused on improving outcomes for veterans and their families through leadership development, community engagement, wellbeing initiatives, and systemic advocacy.

Through engagement with serving members, transitioning personnel and veterans across Australia, VSF has observed recurring structural challenges within Defence and veteran support systems, including fragmented complaint pathways, perceived lack of accountability, slow implementation of reform recommendations, and limited visibility of systemic learning.

3. Appointment and Independence Architecture

The credibility of the Commission will be set by its first appointment. Independence must exist in law and be visible in process.

The Bill provides for appointment by the Governor-General on advice of the Minister. However, it does not mandate a public merit-based selection process, parliamentary scrutiny, or cooling-off periods for recent senior Defence or DVA officials.

Recommendations on Appointment Process

Recommendation 1: Require a publicly advertised, merit-based selection process assessed by an independent panel.

Recommendation 2: Provide for parliamentary committee review of the nominee prior to appointment. E.g. The proposed nominee to appear before the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee prior to final appointment.

This need not constitute a veto power. Rather, it provides cross-party transparency and reinforces independence.

Recommendation 3: Insert statutory qualification criteria reflecting public administration expertise and understanding of military and veteran systems.

Recommendation 4: Introduce a 3–5 year cooling-off period for recent senior executives in Defence or DVA.

4. Systemic Mandate and Use of Individual Cases

While the Bill appropriately focuses on systemic oversight, systemic failures often become visible through sentinel individual cases.

Recommendation 5: Clarify that individual matters may be examined where necessary to identify systemic issues.

5. Transparency and Reporting

The requirement to table reports and Government responses is welcomed. Strengthening implementation accountability will further reinforce effectiveness.

Recommendation 6: Require implementation plans with responsible agencies and timelines in Government responses.

Recommendation 7: Provide authority for follow-up implementation assessments.

Recommendation 8: Insert a presumption of systemic transparency for de-identified findings.

6. Conclusion

The Defence and Veterans' Service Commissioner Bill 2025 represents a meaningful opportunity to strengthen oversight and accountability within Australia's Defence and veteran support systems. With targeted amendments to strengthen appointment transparency, independence safeguards, and implementation accountability, the Commission can become a durable and credible pillar of reform.

References

1. Defence and Veterans' Service Commissioner Bill 2025.

2. Defence and Veterans' Service Commissioner (Consequential and Transitional Provisions) Bill 2025.

3. Explanatory Memorandum – Defence and Veterans' Service Commissioner Bill 2025.

4. Parliamentary Library Bills Digest – Defence and Veterans' Service Commissioner Bills 2025.

5. Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide – Final Report.