MINISTER FOR VETERANS AND PEOPLE

7 February 2025

Dear Mr Simpson,

**REF: YOUR REGULATION 28 REPORT TO PREVENT FUTURE DEATHS
DATED 29 NOVEMBER 2024**

Thank you for your letter of 29 November 2024 to the Ministry of Defence enclosing your Regulation 28 Report following the sad death of LCpl Owen on 11 September 2023. My deepest sympathies go out to LCpl Owen's mother and his wider family and friends.

The Secretary of State for Defence has asked me to respond, and I am grateful for your thorough inquest into LCpl Owen's death. I would like to take this opportunity to reassure you that suicide prevention is taken very seriously by the Armed Forces, and is something which I am personally, very committed to. I have carefully considered your observations and the recommendations raised in your Regulation 28 Report to ensure that future deaths are prevented. I have tried to address each of your points below.

Matter of Concern 1: Vulnerability Risk Management (VRM) process

The policy that supports the Army's VRM Process is currently undergoing a comprehensive review. The plan is to reissue the policy by the end of March 2025. I expect this to further improve the process, while also making it easier to understand and action.

The review of the VRM policy will reassure you that we seek to continuously improve our approach to suicide prevention and that caring for our vulnerable personnel is of paramount importance.

Matter of Concern 2: Training

Suicide prevention training is already mandatory for Army Welfare Officers. I am sorry that this did not come through clearly at the inquest. This is clearly a point of concern and therefore, a working group is being established to fully review all aspects of the training for mental health and wellbeing. I expect the recommendations to be published by April 25 to inform an update to training policy in the following quarter. Your comments concerning a greater focus upon suicide prevention; understanding risk, and the purpose of VRM, will be included within this review.

HM Coroner Mr Robert Simpson
Assistant Coroner for Berkshire
Berkshire Coroners' Office
Reading Town Hall
Blagrave Street
Reading
RG1 1QH

<u>Matter of Concern 3: Information sharing</u>

Your concern about the adequacy of record keeping and the sharing of the risk management plan will be factored into the policy review of the Army's VRM Process and templates will be amended accordingly. Additionally, consideration will be given to directing units on what information should be captured, recorded, shared, and kept, during and after case conferences.

Regarding wider information sharing, particularly between Defence mental health services and the Chain of Command (CoC), it is clear we need to improve. Work has already been done by the Defence Medical Services (DMS) Clinical Reference Group (CRG) around information sharing practices. This work comprises a three-pronged approach:

- Better communication with patients, including obtaining patient consent for information sharing with the chain of command;

- Where appropriate, greater involvement of families (usually spouse or parents) in the delivery of specialist mental healthcare; and

- Wider sharing of best practice, including the Department of Health and Social Care's Consensus Statement and the Zero Suicide Alliance's guidance.

Of course this is not an end in itself, and we will continue to assess whether we are getting this right and where we can improve.

I hope that my response highlights the steps that the Ministry of Defence has and will continue to take to improve the Army's VRM process and policy, suicide prevention and VRM training and information sharing. I appreciate your thorough investigation and challenge, both of which is essential so that the MOD can continue to learn lessons and ensure that this government provides the support our Armed Forces need. As ever, my thoughts remain with LCpl Owen's family and all those affected by his very sad death.

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