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# OASIS PROGRAM EVALUATION: Phase 2 Final Report

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## Executive Summary

CQUniversity was commissioned by Oasis Townsville (Oasis) to conduct an evaluation seeking to understand stakeholders' perception of the services offered by Oasis Townsville and the perceived gaps in the current service offering. Evaluation criteria were aligned with the Veterans Wellbeing Centre (VWC) Framework (2021).

Specifically, the evaluation sought to determine:

- to what extent do Oasis services meet stakeholders needs and what are the gaps?
- to what extent does Oasis facilitate service utilization and access?
- how does Oasis provide veterans the support they need, and can they do it better?

The evaluation team conducted eight interviews, two nominal groups, two focus groups and an online survey during September and October 2023. Overall, 36 people directly contributed to the findings in this study.

Summary findings are that Oasis provides an important service to the Veteran community and their families that is distinct to other Veterans Service Organisations (VSOs)<sup>1</sup>, but that there is work to be done to promote its services more broadly, improve communication across its stakeholder network, and ensure its foundation structure allows for growth in the right direction. Oasis meets and/or exceeds stakeholder expectations in the following areas:

- 1) Facilitator of networks and connection
- 2) Organisational Management and Service Delivery as a holistic, inclusive service organisation that is unique among VSOs in the area.

Recommendations focus on two specific areas:

- 1) Organisational Management and Service Delivery
- 2) Communication with Stakeholders and Public

Survey results, while limited due to small numbers in response, indicate differences in needs and values between stakeholders (Veterans, Community, Family), which is worth further investigation to support future service design and prioritisation.

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<sup>1</sup> ESO and VSO are used interchangeably by participants in this report, but the authors reference to VSO in the report body is inclusive of VSO and ESO.

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## Introduction

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- to what extent do Oasis services meet stakeholders needs and what are the gaps?
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This report outlines the research approach, findings, analysis, and recommendations of this evaluation, conducted between July and October 2022.

## Method

The approach to evaluation was based on a mixed-method methodology, with a focus on qualitative analysis. Ethical approval for the conduct of the evaluation was approved by the Department of Defence Veterans Affairs (#444-22) and Central Queensland University (#0000023771).

Three members of the research team visited Oasis Townsville's facilities to conduct two focus groups (n=8), two nominal groups (n=10) and eight one-to-one interviews with veterans, families, staff, volunteers and other stakeholders (total n=26) in September 2022. Recruitment flyers and advertisements were included in the Oasis Townsville's newsletter and placed around the Oasis Townsville facility. All participants self-selected and volunteered, and all provided informed consent. Data from the focus and nominal groups, and interviews, was summarised and key items of feedback were included to inform the development of a quantitative survey of Oasis stakeholders.

The survey was launched on 03 October 2022, with the primary dissemination methods being inclusion in The Oasis newsletter (n=1) and direct email to individuals who self-identified for participation when original recruitment for the evaluation occurred (n=8). Wider dissemination occurred on 20 October 2022 via advertising on Townsville community Facebook sites<sup>2</sup> resulting in one further response. A total of 10 responses had been received at survey close 31 October. The project team, in consultation with Oasis management, determined that extra time and recruitment would not be sought given the focus on qualitative data and value provided. Of the 10 survey respondents, six identified as Veterans, all of whom had been in contact with Oasis for greater than 12 months, and three since 2018.

Qualitative research experts purport no straightforward answer when asked how many participants to include when using interviews to collect data.<sup>3</sup> The ideal sample size is dependent on numerous factors relating to epistemological, methodological and practical issues.<sup>4</sup> Focus Groups aimed to collect data from small groups of stakeholders including community, veterans, and family members. Semi-structured interviews aimed to collect data related to the value and potential improvements to Oasis Townsville service delivery. Nominal groups asked small groups to identify and rank the most valuable service provided by Oasis, and what services would be most valuable.

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<sup>2</sup> Townsville Notice Board, Townsville Family Life and Everything Townsville. Across the three groups reach is estimated to be >80,000 community members

<sup>3</sup> Baker, S., & Edwards, R. (2017). How many qualitative interviews is enough? Expert voices and early career reflections on sampling and cases in qualitative research. *National centre for research methods review paper*. URL: [https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/4/how\\_many\\_interviews.pdf](https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/4/how_many_interviews.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Roulston, K., & Choi, M. (2018). Qualitative interviews. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection*, 233-249.

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## Section 1: Qualitative Findings

Qualitative findings were grouped into three key themes identified in focus groups, nominal groups, interviews, and qualitative comments in surveys, into which sub-themes were categorised. These related to Oasis' organisational identity, environment and staffing; the role of Oasis in orienting veterans and families to new networks and creating connections; and communication with internal and external stakeholders.

### 1.1 Oasis Organisation

Participants identified several differences between Oasis and other Veteran service providers. Oasis was described as a truly collaborative and inclusive service, and unlike other service providers, focuses more on positive wellbeing than addressing veterans' deficits. It was also noted that Oasis does not exclude veterans and their families based on criteria such as requiring particular diagnosis or status in order to qualify for services. Oasis takes a holistic approach when providing services and does not force consumers to choose between services. Staff and volunteers stated that Oasis does not try to duplicate services currently being delivered well, and when they offer a service, they concentrate on doing it well. Other Veteran service providers were sometimes perceived to be 'cliquey'. In contrast, Oasis staff and volunteers describe Oasis as an inclusive entity that facilitates connections between Veterans and a diverse range of VSOs.

Several participants noted the need to employ more effective strategies when it comes to supporting Veterans' transition from active to retired status. Recommendations to achieve this include Oasis establishing a transition cell on base, or considering ways to support transition, as there was a view that the current transition cell (ADF facilitated) does not appear to be working optimally. Participants felt that building a bridge between Oasis and currently serving veterans is a key factor when it comes to optimising Oasis's services. Several participants mentioned that Oasis should work on a strategy to establish increased reciprocity between Oasis and VSOs.

There was consensus that more specifically targeted services could be identified if structured networking opportunities involving VSOs and Oasis staff were available more often. Participants also suggested that more meaningful relationships between Oasis staff and VSOs would develop due to more frequent networking opportunities and bring the VSO community together.

#### 1.1.1 Identity

Defining the Oasis Townsville appeared hard for many participants, but the importance of the Oasis's work and its value to the veteran community was unmistakable. Half of the survey respondents identified Oasis as a connection or service hub for Veterans and their families with only one respondent [Female, Veteran] describing Oasis in a negative manner.

Emerging from all data sets was a sense that while the Oasis is an innovative and unique VSO that most participants valued highly, there was a lack of clarity on what the Oasis is striving to be and what services the Oasis provides. Example comments included:

*I think one of the biggest barriers is to make sure that the community understand what the services provided are here. I feel like they found their niche in that it is a lot of community events. So the programs that they put on, it seems to be what they're doing really well but then, originally, it was meant to be this one-stop shop, like a hub, so that's unclear. [Female, Spouse, Interview 8]*

And:

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*Like I said, it was that initial idea of it being a one-stop hub. So for me, that would mean not just DVA claims and not just programs. It would also then mean that they would have someone here that you could truly, truly drop in and have a chat to about your mental health or you could organise appointments with your allied health specialist. It could be that you can be connected, like soft transition to other ESOs, more engagement with them. [Female, Spouse, Interview 8]*

*I guess that is confusing to the veteran community too. Like, 'What is Oasis all about?' Should it provide that crisis support? You hear about Oasis – do I call them when there is something going on? I don't think they know, we know, what Oasis is all about. [Female, Community Member, Focus Group 1]*

*I'm not sure it knows [Survey respondent in response to 'How would you describe Oasis', Male, Veteran]*

One participant, when asked what Oasis might be doing better to support them, said they were unable to answer as they were struggling to establish the role of Oasis, thus, what Oasis could provide them:

*I'm at the stage where I'm trying to understand exactly what Oasis is to who? [Male, Focus Group 2]*

Despite some confusion among community members as to the role the Oasis seeks to play as a VSO, it was clear that many members appreciate how Oasis is working hard to create a unique service and continuously improve their services to the community:

*I think I'm just very impressed with how they have – you can see that they're attempting to make changes and they're attempting to improve, so that's probably one of the key things for me and why it makes me stay even when I have moments where I'm like, "Oh, I wish I did this better." That's what makes me want to keep going and keep being a volunteer, because I know they're trying to improve. [Female, Spouse, Interview 8]*

Where participants had clarity about Oasis services, it was perceived as an organisation which is flexible enough to facilitate the needs of all veterans, without the need to 'qualify' for services. As one participant identified, this creates opportunities for Oasis, such as being directly involved in the transition process:

*Transitions needs to start when you join the military, not six months before or two years after, or ten years after ... And this is where Oasis can get involved because there's no other organisation here in Townsville that you can tap into if you're getting out just on your own, like voluntary discharge. You have to be wounded or injured to join Mates4Mates, and not everyone has those labels, and not everyone wants to have those labels when they discharge from the military. [Female, Nominal Group 2]*

### **1.1.2 Oasis: Environment**

There is a common perception that the hub itself provides a quiet and welcoming space where the wider veteran community can meet and connect, whilst acting as a centralised point for information dissemination. Most participants commented positively on Oasis' unique physical environment, and that it had a calming influence on them or those with whom they interacted. Comments included:

*I think it's very welcoming. There's always a nice environment. When new people come in, it's very welcoming. They don't feel like they are out of place or that they shouldn't be here. That's been some feedback that I've had from some of the families that I've attended. [Female, Spouse, Interview 8]*

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*So if I bring an officer here for debrief, or whatever the purpose may be, we can walk in here, it's a very, it's not an intimidating place, because you're not walking straight in to a reception desk. [Male, Community User, Focus Group 1]*

*If someone walks in the door and they wanna talk to someone, or in crisis, or they just wanna have a chat about something, we filter them through the planning staff...we are responsive. We have a no wrong door policy. [Male, Staff, Interview 5].*

Participants commented that Oasis felt inclusive, noting that other VSOs that can be male-centric and elderly. For example, Oasis offers a space where children and spouses are welcome:

*So that's something that I've definitely seen and something that I recommend people, is that you might have gone to another ESO and you might have felt that you didn't quite fit in there, but to give Oasis a go and see what they've got to offer, because it is very different to what else is out there. [Female, Spouse, Interview 8]*

One participant commented that more could be done to support female veterans or to tap into existing networks that are already established to support this cohort. Oasis was also seen as a safe space for First Nations visitors, but an additional opportunity was identified to host 'safety tours':

*Create a safety tour of Oasis. And by safety, I don't mean that you'll trip over that chair. A lot of people contact me and go, "<Redacted>, is it safe there?" and I say, "Yeah, it is." But for us, safety is it's nonjudgmental, it's not biased, it's not racist ... And then sometimes we may need to come here once or twice, three times before we feel comfortable to talk to you. That's just who we are. [Male, Nominal Group 2]*

A number of participants commented about the influence of service bias in VSOs. One participant noted that there was a perception by some members of the veteran community that Oasis was targeted towards Army as a service:

*So I actually had – some of my husband's friends asked me – two different coffee dates, two different people, and I was really like, "Oh, that's the same thing I just spoke about." And they mentioned that they didn't feel that there was much involvement from the RAAF here, that everything seems to be very army-based. I don't know if that's what they just see, but – yeah, they didn't feel that there was much involvement. [Female, Staff/volunteer, Interview 5]*

The ability to use the huts for different activities was recognised as a unique and valuable service by participants. Participants suggested that they could be used more effectively to increase access by broader sections of the community. For example, conducting daily well-being activities and weekly educational/support sessions was a recommended strategy to use the huts more optimally. There was also the suggestion that Oasis conduct one 'big ticket' item each month to increase community engagement and awareness.

The other physical entity that attracted comment was the café. This was identified as one of the most valuable services provided by Oasis by nominal group participants. Many participants suggested the café be encouraged to review food options to meet the needs of a wider community, although the research team noted the change in management of the café during this evaluation that may address this suggestion. One survey participant was critical of the changes to the café with regard to food offerings and service, and developing a specific feedback process for the café may be useful.

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### 1.1.3 Oasis: Staffing and Management

All participants acknowledged the important role that Oasis plays in facilitating services to meet Veterans and their families' 10 human needs, and the emergent approaches to staff support of veterans, their families and communities via numerous actions and services. Staff interviewees, for example, commented: *"when someone walks through our front door, we're timely and responsive" (P1); "the nuance of being a neutral place off base or barracks is working...anyone within the veteran community can come here and get support through one door access for anything"(P3).* Staff and volunteer commitment was evident, as this comment indicates:

*You leave every day with goose bumps, without fail. You feel like you're benefiting someone else's life. [Female, Spouse/volunteer, Interview 2]*

Staff believe customers are satisfied by the increasing level of consumer engagement in the diverse range of connections programs, volunteer programs and social engagement activities that Oasis facilitates. The volunteer programs are held in esteem but also pose a risk when an activity relies on one person for coordination and delivery. Staff believe customer needs are triaged efficiently and Oasis is responsive to the cohorts' articulated needs. Although some participants noted that there had been some teething issues associated with volunteer management, overall staff and volunteers feel valued and perceive Oasis to have a well-established, effective, transparent governance structure, with one staff member commenting:

*I've never seen anything in a start-up so well done as here, 'cause you're often coming in – I mean, I'm a bit boring, I like to read policy and procedure and I'm a bit process-orientated, but it's very clean and very precise. It's very much like a defence setup, which is – makes sense, doesn't it, 'cause it's got oversight of all these ex-veterans, but it's very – the governance is just spot on. [Male, Staff, Interview 2]*

Staff benefit from their involvement with Oasis, as expressed here, where one staff member said her involvement with Oasis had positively impacted her general health:

*I started here as a smoker, drink two to three times a week, quite heavily. I wasn't like a yelly, angry alcoholic type I was party hard. I wouldn't even say alcoholic. When I started work here, I quit smoking, all of a sudden, I don't want to drink anymore, I'm going to start going to the gym. That's the purpose, I suppose. [Female, Spouse/Staff, Interview 6]*

Whilst all participants agreed that the current staff comprised appropriately skilled people, staffing levels were noted as a concern, with some deficits in the ability to deliver services consistently. However, all participants acknowledged this was due to funding limitations:

*The only problem is that – 'cause we've got such a limited capacity, like I've only got 15 hours a week out, I believe that's capacity, usually. [Male, Veteran/Staff, Interview 7]*

Staff would like a clear staff structure with strategies in place for succession planning, involving targeted training and development opportunities. There was some concern about blurred lines between staff and volunteer role expectations, with many suggesting this could be resolved with clearer internal communication around role descriptions. More volunteer run programs would enhance current offering, noting the risk involved when responsibility for programs rests with one person.

While communication generally is covered later in this report, internal communication regarding the roles of staff and volunteers was a recurring theme. Volunteers often received conflicting messages about their role in terms of the commitment expected by the Oasis:

*Well, that's where the communication comes in. On one hand, we hear that it is quite flexible, "Oh, if there's something happens or whatever, you just let us know, that's fine," but then*



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*another person would be like, “Oh, no, you have to commit to that eight hours and that’s just how it is. If you can’t do it, don’t bother signing up.” [Female, Spouse, Interview 8]*

Lack of consistency in volunteers’ access to some Oasis resources also was raised. For example, some volunteers have access to Oasis email and some do not, which means some volunteers miss out on important communications:

*A lot of my volunteers, including myself, don’t have the Oasis email. So it seems we use our own email, which is fine, that’s not an issue but then we miss out on a lot of communication. So for example, they had like a volunteer morning tea, and I think only one of my volunteers out of like four or five actually knew about it. [Female, Spouse, Interview 8]*

Inconsistencies such as this can undermine volunteers’ commitment to their roles and deter volunteering by others. Similar gaps were highlighted in communication via social media, where the community is missing out on important messages from the Oasis. When attempts are made to rectify the gap, it is unclear who is responsible for ensuring important messages are communicated:

*The same thing, there was actually an event in the evening and a lot of our volunteers never received an invite to that. So that makes it tough as well. We’ve tried to follow-up a number of times but then, again it’s like, “Oh, who takes care of social media?” “Oh, I don’t know,” “Oh, it’s this person,” “Oh, no, it’s this person.” [Female, Spouse, Interview 8]*

The need for organisational planning was raised by a number of participants. For example:

*I think we need a staff development plan and training plan. There could be one in existence, I don’t know...There could be higher levels like – I know that there are opportunities for me to be trained so on and so forth. Only having one advocate with a couple that had come to a training but it’s a very scary, “What happens if Josh falls over?” it’s terrifying...So we’ve got one qualified advocate, we’ve got two in training that are very base level, can’t really do much at all, and takes months. I understand it’s across the sector. It’s not just us. But this is something that we should have planned months and months and years ago really. [Female, Spouse/Staff, Interview 6]*

Finally, it was evident that Oasis’ public profile is linked with the Director, which was recognised as a risk and a benefit by participants. Example comments include:

*Participant 1: A lot of people run Oasis, so when you hear the name Oasis, people automatically think of John Caligari, but why is it like that? He just doesn’t run Oasis.*

*Participant 2: It’s his place.*

*Participant 1: I don’t think that’s fair. Because he is not the one who is running the whole place. [Focus Group 1]*

And:

*I think it’s [Oasis] a standout in terms of the wellbeing centres and the trials around Australia. The Oasis is definitely – they stand out in terms of the infrastructure and what they’re trying to do in self-sustainability – but that might be a testament to the person who is running the Oasis, not the whole concept [Female, Focus group 2]*

It was evident to the research team that the organisation is aware of this as a risk, but succession planning and identifying alternative spokespeople would assist in mitigating this.

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## 1.2 Facilitating Connections

Participants noted Oasis is unique in the VSO community. For example, one participant reflected on how different the service his organisation was able to provide staff, some of whom were veterans, might look without Oasis:

*It would have looked very different - we wouldn't have a single point of focus for, as they rightly say, it's for providing safe services to veterans, we wouldn't have that easier referral pathways, and we wanted to try it on the spirit of a single-point of contact for veterans. That's what's great for us. [Male, Focus Group 2]*

Another participant said that Oasis provides a neutral space for multiple VSOs to interact, which might neutralise some of the “politics” evident in the veterans' space.

*I'd say there's a good deal of politics through the veterans' groups, and I can say that from the outside looking in, and I think there's different levels of professionalism. There's also different levels of resourcing and competency. So, I think Oasis does give us a place to put all of those different organisations, different ESOs. [Male, Focus Group 2]*

Another participant stressed that the Oasis works hard to break down the siloed approach that some veterans feel they must adhere to:

*I think the biggest thing going on at the moment is the fact that we're very focused on making sure the veterans don't feel like they have to choose a side. People seem to think that as soon as they sign up for Mates4Mates, they can't come here and vice versa, and we're very focused on making sure that people know that that's not the case. [Female, Spouse, Staff, Interview 6]*

Still, participants cautioned that Oasis risks being perceived as ‘just another service provider’ in the veterans' space, rather than something distinctly different:

*Oasis is trying to be that kind of neutral point of contact but they're ultimately another player. It's unfortunately, probably the case with many of that in that sense. [Male, Focus Group 2]*

Participants identified that there are multiple VSOs competing for the same limited funding and duplicating services, and an opportunity exists to work together in a more coordinated way. Many suggested ways of working together; for example, participants were aware of the expertise within RSL regarding advocacy but suggested that there were ways Oasis could complement existing services. For example:

*Well, it comes back to the veteran community if they're still asking for services. For example, compensation advocacy. If I still got a four-month waitlist and RSL has got a four-month waitlist, there's obviously gap there, whereas when this place was built, they put a kitchen in, you're teaching veterans how to cook or teaching younger people how to cook and stuff in mind, but then through discovery, we found that there's an organisation called [Redacted] who already does that, so partnering up with them 'cause they do it, they do it well, letting them run that service and not duplicating unnecessarily. [Male, Veteran/Staff, Interview 7]*

Oasis offers additional capacity for a service where other providers are unable to meet demand and highlights the important role the Oasis could develop further, built around its core identity as a central hub for veterans, and as a co-ordinator of VSOs to identify services gaps and capacity shortfalls.

When survey respondents were asked to rank their ‘top five’ currently offered services from a list developed during the focus and nominal groups the highest endorsement across Veterans, family and interested community members was for ‘self-evaluation/continuous learning’ services, followed by

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various connection type services (e.g. 'Connection'; Banjo Breakfasts, Veteran and Families business alliance). Linked in with this the highest demand for 'not currently offered' service revolved around Veteran and families' services (particularly Veterans/Families Day and Husband/wives/kids connection programs). [See Appendix 2]. This supported comments by participants who welcomed the involvement of family within Oasis Service provision:

*I think initially the place was set up veteran-centric, whereas now, we're starting to widen and we're seeing those reports in the interim reports on suicide in defence force about how much impact the service has not just on the veteran itself but also the family and the children especially. [Male, Staff, Interview 1]*

### 1.2.1 Introduction to supportive networks

One of the most dominant themes within focus groups was how the facilitation of activities by Oasis introduced those who may otherwise not have engaged with services and the community. Comments included:

*It's safe, it's calming. I mean I come here basically because a friend of mine said, 'Why don't you come here and do the watercolour?'. I'm like, I can't do art <laughter> ... but just that one activity, I can't believe that, you know, it does that calming thing. [Female, Community User, Focus Group 1]*

*I've got involved with Oasis because I knew some people that are already connected to it and suggested that there may be an area I could help in, which was volunteering with sewing, sewing group. [Female, Spouse, Interview 8]*

Both comments indicate that they were introduced to Oasis by word of mouth, which was reinforced by a staff interviewee:

*Word of mouth is still our biggest method of communication, but that's not getting to enough people [Male, Staff, Interview 1]*

Participants acknowledged the challenge, however, of providing facilitated introductions for a community who have vastly different needs:

*I need an in, I need a reason. Is yoga my reason? If it is then great, there's a yoga session and that's my in. If yoga is not me, what's my in? And I don't know how many things you run to cater for everybody's in. I don't know. You can run 3000 things and still not have the in for that person [Male, Focus Group 2]*

Some participants specifically identified a need to provide clear pathways for current-serving members to engage with Oasis, such as via unit level visits:

*I haven't seen happen is, let's say [the unit] come down here as a whole so that the lieutenant, the captain, the digger, the warrant officer, the sergeant, whoever can actually go, "Oh, sweet, this is what's on offer here at my level and levels above me and levels below me". [Male, Nominal Group 2]*

The suggestion here was that Oasis facilitates or promotes site visits to units for current serving personnel. Providing more transition services was high on most staff interviewees' radar, with this from one staff member: "...take on that role of transitioning members... we can contact Department of Defence to say, "Hey, we'll look after all your transitions, and we'll address problems early" [Male, Staff, Interview 7].

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The size of the veteran community, and inter-connectivity, within Townsville was both an affordance and a challenge for participants. Reference was made to relationships—who knows who—throughout the data. Several participants noted their connection with Oasis was facilitated via pre-existing relationships with the Oasis Director or other Defence affiliated groups. For example, this participant drew on existing connections prior to finally connecting with Oasis:

*But I went to the [Redacted] – I approached them first. Now they're linked in with the RSL because their former president is the Director of the RSL. Yep that's where you're going. And he showed up and said, "they want to do this" and they know me at the RSL. I know the President – we served together. [Male, Community, Focus Group 1]*

This same participant was reluctant to make direct contact with the Oasis Director because of respect for rank based on that participant's military background. However, because he knew a mutual friend, he felt he would be able to link through that relationship. This highlights the complexity of the relationships that influence engagement with Oasis, and some of the challenges to engaging with the organisation when those who engage are familiar with and continue to respect rank structures, even when service has completed.

### 1.3 Communication

Many participants raised communication as an issue requiring improvement by the organisation, both internal and externally. The themes that emerged from interviews included the need for greater consistency and clarity in messaging, and the need to consider different channels to engage a broader range of stakeholders (which was supported by survey data, see Section 2). One staff interviewee noted the impact of staff change, saying: *"There has been a lot of change in our staffing structure which, in turn, we've lost a lot of communication and there's... a lot of confusion around what the expectation is of roles..." [Female, Staff, Interview 2].*

Staff considered Oasis to have a good level of community engagement but are concerned that many of the target audience (Veterans, families and their communities) are unaware of upcoming events. It appeared that Oasis has not yet achieved strong awareness amongst members of key target audiences. This was clearly demonstrated by one participant, a civilian community member who shared a story about her neighbour, who is an Army veteran and lives in the area adjacent to Oasis:

*[I asked him] "Have you been to the Oasis?". He said, "What?" And I said, "Well, it's actually in your neighbourhood. It's actually four blocks away and when he came here he was, "This is amazing." Nobody knows about it. [Female, Focus Group 2]*

#### 1.3.1 Terminology

Confusing terminology is seen as a barrier to Veterans' engagement with Oasis services. This comment from a Staff interviewee was indicative of several participants:

*I normally refer to us as a defence community hub...I had a young girl the other day that phoned and she's a current serving RAAF member and on our Google page it had veteran, and she assumed that we were unable to help her with anything because of the word veteran. [Female, Spouse/Staff, Interview 2]*

To reinforce this concern, many participants (staff and volunteers) described Veterans as retired from service when asked to define the term 'Veteran'. Many stated that currently-serving veterans did not consider themselves Veterans, and therefore, were potentially not accessing Oasis services:

*There are so many current serving members that have no idea what we are, who we are, where we are, and what we offer, it's crazy. And I think that a lot of that – sorry, I'm probably*

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*snowballing now, but I think a lot of that comes from the term veteran which is disappointing because people don't realise that, by definition, a veteran is somebody that served one day in the Defence Force. People associate veteran with an elderly gentleman that's come back from World War II. It's the term, so it's the definition around veteran. People see veteran and they go, "Oh, no, I'm not a veteran. I'm still a current serving member." [Female, Spouse/Staff, Interview 2]*

Participants identified opportunities for Oasis to translate or openly communicate norms about the veteran community for civilian organisations seeking to work with or provide services for the community. This participant named this 'cultural competency for veterans':

*We should be doing particularly around veteran cultural competency for non-members. I don't have any relationships to the defence force. So there's been a lot of things like acronyms that I've had to work through. So if there was an opportunity for me to get a better understanding – and that's where we had a lot of our roadblocks through developing the program, was we didn't have an understanding of how the veterans base worked as far as transitioning members and what they're entitled to, and what they can do. [Female, Nominal Group 2]*

Some participants agreed that the perception of Oasis as a space only for veterans is unhelpful, as per the comment below, this is further influenced by lack of clarity about Oasis' role:

*I think that it's breakaway the stigma that it's military-only hub or your veterans only – that stigma has got to go. [Male, Focus Group 2]*

The question to be considered by Oasis management is associated with key messaging about service to those beyond the immediate veteran community. One staff member raised the risk that as OASIS grows and increases the number of activities and services it supports, it may lose focus on the 'why' behind its service delivery (suicide prevention):

*And that's a population health approach to what we're doing. So we're not just doing scuba diving 'cause it's fun. We're doing scuba diving as population health approach ... Now, whether we understand or not, we can sell that 'cause that's our points of difference. That's our philosophy as to why we do something. We can do a lot of what, but if we don't know why we're doing it, we can't sell why we're doing it, no one will ever get it. We're just doing stuff. [Male, Staff, Interview 3]*

This staff member commented on the need to reinforce messages that remind and reinforce customers and potential clients of OASIS' focus:

*I think the philosophy piece is right, but it's not well-understood and repeatedly it needs – because it's so new and such a paradigm shift, it constantly has to be reminded. It's too easy to say our mission makes us feel good. How does it make us feel good? Otherwise, we can't bring anyone else along the journey. [Male, Staff, Interview 3]*

### **1.3.2 Stakeholder Engagement**

Further to the above comment about messaging, participants identified the potential to engage more strategically with members of the general community, specifically neighbours of the Oasis. While specific engagement opportunities were identified (i.e., playground, cricket pitches, etc), the overarching theme was the need for Oasis to clearly communicate its purpose to the broader community. One participant said there is a perception that "Oasis is only for Veterans" [Female, Focus Group 2]. The same participant identified positive opportunities for Oasis if community members felt more comfortable using Oasis facilities:

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*I know it's for veterans but it could also be for communities because the café is well, it would be financially sustainable if they involve the community as well. [Female, Focus Group 2]*

Participants agreed that outward-facing promotions need to be conducted more effectively. Currently, word of mouth and social media are predominantly used to disseminate social engagement activities, limiting the potential audience. Several strategies to address this point were offered throughout the interviews, focus groups, and nominal groups, and included: hiring regular space at shopping centres with an Oasis representative present, being present at fetes, notices in school newsletters, and securing a part-time staff member dedicated to promoting Oasis activities/services to the larger community.

Participants saw a 'successful' Oasis as facilitating "some connection activity two, three times a day...one or two big ticket connection items once a month at least...educational/business growth opportunity happening here once a week... some sort of wellbeing activity every day" [Female, Staff, Interview 6].

Oasis also needs to be seen as a 'good neighbour' in the community. Discussion in one focus group, for example, noted parking complaints, especially on busy days at Oasis, when residents are inconvenienced. Participants identified that engaging directly with broader community has benefits:

*If you look after community, there's no complaints. (Male, Focus Group 2)*

The potential for tension between services, and its influence within the Oasis environment, was raised:

*I'm not sure. I think sometimes there is that little bit of a snobbery there between the air force and the army, that underlying tone, and I'm speaking very generalised here. I think it would be good to see a bit more involvement and see what they can bring as well to the community. I actually said to people who asked me about it – I said, "I'd be really surprised if the air force wasn't approached already about doing things here." Whether or not they want to is another thing. They've probably got their own things going, but I think that would be really good. [Female, Staff/Volunteer, Interview 7]*

The Oasis Newsletter was considered valuable by focus group and nominal group participants, but interestingly only community members (not Veteran or family member survey respondents) rated the Oasis Newsletter in their 'top 5' currently offered services. This indicates that a variety of communication methods is required to ensure engagement with a broad range of stakeholders, with opportunity for personal interaction and communication being important.

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## Section 2: Quantitative Findings

While qualitative comments from the surveys were considered in Section 1, this section examines the quantitative results drawn from the survey data. While the research team is conscious that there were only nine respondents, and no overall conclusions or further inferential analysis can be made, there were, nonetheless, some interesting insights that may be worth further investigation.

### 2.1 Demographic

There was an even spread of male and female respondents (n=5 male/5 female), although Veterans were predominantly male and Family Members exclusively female. Ages ranged from 25-34 to 55+ with most participants in the older age groups ('45-54' n=3, '55+' n=5). All of the men were older Veterans ('45-54' n=2; '55+' n=3); the one Female Veteran was also in the older '55+' age group. As all Veterans were older, the predominant means of recruitment for the survey missed the younger Veteran cohort.

One third (33%) of Veterans lived on their own, 50% in a family with a child over 10 years of age. Those who indicated being 'Family members of Veterans' were the youngest of the participants and exclusively women. 'Interested Community Member' were exclusively female and in the older age groups ('45-54' n=1, '55+' n=1).

All respondents had been in contact with Oasis for more than 6 months, three of the Veterans had been involved with Oasis since inception in 2018, demonstrating commitment to the organisation. Both 'Family' and 'Community' respondents had been involved with Oasis for more than a year.

### 2.2 Definition of Oasis

Survey participants were asked how they would describe Oasis. Responses were:

- Run activities for veterans and families [Male, 45-54, Veteran]
- I find that the Oasis is a referral centre to other organisations [Male, 55+, Veteran]
- Appalling [Female, 55+, Veteran]
- To support current and past ADF members and families [Female, 55+, Community]
- Veteran and Families Social Connection Centre [Female, 35-44, Family]
- Host of community events [Female, 45-54, Community]
- I'm not sure it knows [Male, 55+, Veteran]
- Serving veteran community [Male, 55+, Veteran]
- Supporting veterans and their families to access information and support services [Female, 35-44, Family]
- Connector and Shared Space for all ESO, veterans and their families [Male, 45-54, Veteran]

The only female Veteran has had contact with Oasis over the past 6-12 months so the 'appalling' comment would be in relation to current activities. In contrast the male Veteran 'not sure it knows' has been involved with Oasis since inception.

Half of respondents identified Oasis as a connection/service hub for Veterans and their families (vs for Veterans alone)

## 2.3 Results from the Enriched Life Scale (ELS)

Survey respondents were asked a series of questions from the Enriched Life Scale, to determine their level of well-being in accordance with an established scale used previously in military contexts. Results are presented in Table 1 below. As Veterans fell into two groups, one with low levels of Genuine Relationships/Sense of Purpose and lower Mental Health (n=2), the other group (n=3) had higher levels of all three subscales. Veterans had higher Physical Health (average 49) and Engaged Citizenship (average 76) than civilians (average 37 and 63 respectively). Average ELS for Veterans was 72, Family 63 and Community Member 60.

This is counter to published literature that reports Veterans having lower total ELS than civilians.<sup>5</sup> Overall, the scores in this small sample are lower than that reported by Angel et al. which may be, at least partially explained by both extremely low scores for one Veteran and one Family Member. Due to the small sample the average score has been substantially impacted by these extreme scores.

**Table 1: Results from the Enriched Life Scale**

Participant	Genuine Relationships	Sense of Purpose	Engaged Citizenship	Physical Health Civilian	Physical Health Veteran	Mental Health Civilian	Mental Health Veteran	TOTAL ELS
Veteran	36	54	38		83		75	57
Veteran	34	44	45		33		13	54
Community	75	71	67	21		65		60
Family	98	96	100	54		95		89
Community	66	60	58	58		60		60
Veteran	75	94	96		46		75	77
Veteran	100	100	100		42		96	88
Family	84	29	25	13		35		37
Veteran	97	98	100		42		79	83

## 2.4 Survey response: ‘Most valuable’ service currently offered by Oasis.

Survey respondents were asked to identify and rank the top five most valuable services provided by Oasis (see Table 2 below). The list had been generated by participants in the nominal groups during the qualitative phase of the evaluation.

The highest preference service (across Veterans, Family members or Interested community member), or most valued service, was ‘self-evaluation/continuous learning’ which referred to opportunities for self-reflection and learning new skills. Banjo breakfast, rooms for hire, and Veteran and Families business alliance were the only other service(s) that were endorsed by veterans, family *and* community. Unique to Veterans was the BBQ trailer, Brothers in Books and promotion of employment opportunities. The ‘wellness program’ was endorsed by family members only while the newsletter, peer support and ‘check your mates’ services were only endorsed by community members.

These results, while not generalisable due to the size of response, do indicate that different stakeholders potentially have different needs and value different services. Some options that received nil response (such as ‘meeting place’) could be considered equivalent to similar options. For example,

<sup>5</sup> Angel, C. M., Woldetsadik, M. A., Armstrong, N. J., Young, B. B., Linsner, R. K., Maury, R. V., & Pinter, J. M. (2020). The Enriched Life Scale (ELS): Development, exploratory factor analysis, and preliminary construct validity for U.S. military veteran and civilian samples. *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, 10(1), 278-291.



the coffee shop was referred to in the qualitative data as the preferred meeting place. Other options that received nil response, such as 'single front door', contrasted with responses in qualitative data which referenced the value of this single point of contact approach.

**Table 2. 'Most valuable' service currently offered by The Oasis**

Service nominated in other data collection as 'most valuable' of those <u>currently offered</u> :				
	Comment	Veterans	Family	Community
Self-evaluation/continuous learning	Highest endorsement 5 '1's', 2 '2's'	1,1,2	1,1	1,2
Connection		2,4	4	
Peer support	Only community			5
Opportunity to host events			2	1
Point of contact/single front door	Not indicated by any participant			
Banjo Breakfasts		1	2,5	4
Wellness programs	Important to family members		3,5	
Rooms for hire		2	4	3
Meeting place	Not indicated by any participant			
Newsletter	Only community			4
Market Days		3,4		5
Referral pathways	Not indicated by any participant			
Promotion of employment opportunities		3		
Resume assistance	Not indicated by any participant			
Brothers in books		4		
Check your mates	Valued by community but not Veteran or family			3
Noticeboard of future plans/events	Not indicated by any participant			
BBQ trailer	Only Veterans	1,5		
Veteran and Families business alliance		1	3	2,5
Coffee shop		2	3	
Advocate referral		5		

\* number indicates the rank given out of 5 by individual respondents

## 2.5 Survey response: 'Most valuable' service not currently offered by Oasis.

Survey respondents were asked to identify and rank the top five most valuable services not provided by Oasis (see Table 3 below).

Highest preference 'not currently offered' services (across Veterans, Family and Community members) were Veterans/Families Day and the Husband/wives/kids connection program. While stronger links to First Nations people wasn't selected, both community and veteran responses indicated support for a First Nations cultural safety tour as a priority activity. Respondents appeared to prioritise opportunities for connection between veterans, families and communities, such as opportunities to bring veteran and non-veteran communities together, which appeared to be a more specific option than 'Monthly networking opportunities for those involved with Oasis to meet', which received nil response. Three respondents indicated preference for longer operating hours at Oasis, which is consistent with a number of comments made by focus group participants.

The survey participants did not endorse some of the services nominated in the other forms of data collection because they were restricted to only list five options.

**Table 3. 'Most valuable' service not currently offered by The Oasis**

Service nominated in other data collection as 'most valuable' of those <u>not</u> currently offered:				
	Comment	Veteran	Family	Community
Knowledgeable advocates	Veteran only	3		
Mark dates of significance				
Stronger link to First Nations People				
Cultural Competence training				
First Nations Safety Tour of facilities to promote safety of space		5		1
Healthy options for the Coffee Shop		1	4	
Longer operating hours		1,1		3
Out of hours drop in	Veteran only	2		
Monthly networking opportunities for those involved with Oasis to meet				
Information Day about Oasis families			1	1
Information pack for families				
Better website/PR	Veteran only	2		
Intergenerational activities for veterans to connect including current and past soldiers	Family only		2,3	
Host local unit visits				
Future Training Needs committee				
Veterans/Families day		1	2,4	3
Husband/wives/kids connection program		2	1,3	2
Veteran cultural competency program for non-veterans		4		
Facilitation of vets/family members to volunteer		2	5	
Dedicated men's program for positive parenting/DV		3		4,4
More lived experience as veterans or family in Oasis team		3		
After school program for children	Community member only			2
DFMS Link for on-site link	Community member only			5
Opportunities to raise the status of female veterans	Veteran only	4		
Opportunities to bridge veteran/non-veteran community		4,5,5	5	

\* number indicates the rank given out of 5 by individual respondents

As a conclusive statement, the majority of recruitment occurred via those who self-identified for survey participation following the original recruitment posts (for Interviews/nominal groups etc), these were included in the newsletter and on twitter. Specific recruitment solely through the newsletter did not generate much interest, nor was Facebook recruitment successful. This could suggest that the newsletter is not reaching the target audience or it could reflect the target population and a reluctance to answer yet another online survey. Given that the other data gathering approaches for this evaluation did manage to recruit sufficient participants for activities that have a higher time commitment, alternatives to online survey should be explored in the future. One possibility could be telephone surveys if Oasis has contact details of stakeholders.

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## Section 3: Summary

Oasis is a relatively young organisation that has emerged as an important service provider for veterans and their families in Townsville. It has already demonstrated real benefit for those who have engaged with it and is demonstrating a continuous improvement mindset as it adjusts to a consolidation phase after establishment and initial growth. This section summarises key findings as they align to the evaluation research questions. Oasis meets or exceeds stakeholders' expectations because it:

- employs skilled staff able to meet the needs of veterans and their families;
- provides a centralised point of information dissemination;
- engages stakeholders through a variety of activities and services;
- efficiently triages and assesses customer needs;
- provides and supports a welcoming, culturally specific, safe space for veterans and their families;
- embraces its key role as a bridge between veterans and services, and veterans in transition;
- facilitates veterans and their families' access to services to meet their 10 human needs;
- is an inclusive service that does not exclude veterans and their families by way of categorisation (e.g., wounded or ill);
- uses a holistic approach, allowing consumers to access a variety of VSO options;
- seeks to fill gaps with high quality services rather than duplicating existing services;
- takes a unique approach to community building among ESOs, setting it apart from other providers;
- applies good governance that is transparent and effective.

Elements of Oasis that are working but could be improved:

- implement processes to ensure key services are coordinated and delivered by volunteer teams (not just one volunteer);
- increase staffing levels to allow more consistent service levels;
- clarify staff structure, role descriptions and expectations (especially important for communication of differences between staff and volunteer roles);
- transparent succession planning with strategic training and development opportunities available for staff;
- extend the use of the huts, for example daily wellbeing activities or weekly educational/support sessions;
- improve communication with and to stakeholders, making use of multiple communication channels, to ensure awareness of all upcoming events;
- clarify terminology, such as the defining 'veteran', so all eligible veterans connect with Oasis;
- café food offerings.

Gaps identified that could enhance Oasis current services:

- new promotional channels beyond word of mouth and social media to promote Oasis services;
- create an Oasis marketing role to facilitate greater communication reach and consistency;

- 
- consider more targeted veterans'-in-transition services;
  - engage serving veterans to develop greater links between veterans and Oasis;
  - leverage Oasis links with other VSOs to identify more targeted services and develop the VSO community more broadly.

Ultimately, it is clear that Oasis facilitates access to services and support to veterans, families and communities in a unique and meaningful way. Even when providing critique, participants were clear in their intent to assist and ensure Oasis is successful in its mission. The strength of Oasis is in its environment, structure, and approach as a facilitator of connecting services. Participants commented that the ability to provide input via the qualitative evaluation was valuable, as many of them had not met one another, or were not aware of one another's services or issues prior to meeting in focus or nominal groups. With attention to recommendations, Oasis will cement its position in Townsville as a valuable VSO that distinguishes itself from others by its holistic service delivered in a custom-designed facility.

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## Section 4: Recommendations

The following recommendations for consideration as continuous improvement for Oasis are provided here based on the findings of this evaluation.

### 4. 1 Recommendations: Organisational Management and Service Delivery

- **Leadership and management**
  - implement a distributed leadership model to support sustainability and succession planning;
  - develop transparent succession plan with strategic training and development opportunities available for staff;
  - create a staff development and training plan for staff and volunteers;
  - mentor and train staff as optional spokespeople for the organisation to highlight its range of services and expertise;
  - implement processes to ensure key services are coordinated and delivered by volunteer teams (not just one volunteer);
  - clarify staff structure, role descriptions and expectations (especially important for communication of differences between staff and volunteer roles);
  - increase staffing levels to allow more consistent service levels, including expansion of service hours.
- **Relationship with other VSOs**
  - leverage Oasis' strong links with other VSOs to identify options for more targeted services and develop the VSO community more broadly;
- **Service Provision**
  - identify opportunity to target veteran's-in-transition services more specifically, including engaging serving veterans to develop greater links between veterans and Oasis;
  - develop targeted strategies to engage with female veterans, including drawing on existing networks;
  - extend the use of the huts, for example daily wellbeing activities or weekly educational/support sessions;
  - consider expansion of service hours;
  - review and update the café/food offerings.

### 4. 2 Recommendations: Communication with Stakeholders and Public

- **Stakeholder engagement**
  - conduct strategic stakeholder mapping exercise to inform strategic communication planning;
  - identify more opportunities for veteran/non-veteran community to interact, in the form of information days, networking opportunities; connection programs; possibly drawing on existing resources and activities (such as the Banjo Breakfasts, BBQ Trailer, Coffee shop);
  - identify specific cohort cultural needs (such as First Nations, female, disability) and develop targeted plan for inclusive engagement and support to ensure that Oasis feels a safe space for all;

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- conduct one 'big ticket' event per month to engage stakeholders and provide an opportunity for them to connect.
  - **Communication planning and delivery**
    - develop and action a communication plan to effectively promote the organisational mission and activities to internal and external stakeholders;
    - develop three key messages to support communication plan and broader engagement that reinforce role of, and service provision by, Oasis.
    - **develop** promotional channels beyond word of mouth and social media for promoting Oasis services, ideally targeted to stakeholders so that they receive information via the most relevant and engaging means;
    - create an Oasis marketing role to facilitate greater communication reach and consistency;
    - clarify terminology, such as the defining 'veteran', and promote so all eligible veterans feel willing and comfortable to connect with Oasis;
    - develop/implement a feedback mechanism for anonymous, qualitative comments to reinforce continuous improvement mindset of Oasis management and staff.

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## APPENDIX 1 – Qualitative Participant Questions

### Focus Groups

Focus Group aims to facilitate a participant discussion about Oasis Townsville service delivery's value and potential improvements. Specific questions were associated with the two broad research questions:

#### *Questions*

1. Please tell us your first name and describe your relationship and background with Oasis Townsville.
2. Why have you chosen to access Oasis Townsville services?
3. Do you also access other veteran service organisation services? Note: some participants may be accessing those other ESOs through Oasis, so could be a discussion here about the ability of Oasis Townsville to support other ESOs.
4. If you have experience with other ESOs, can you comment on any differences between Oasis Townsville and those other organisations?
5. Has Oasis Townsville facilitated greater access to services for you and your family? If so, please describe how, and provide an example.
6. Are there, or have there previously been, any barriers to accessing networks and relationship challenges that impact your/family member's willingness to access services and support? [Please describe or comment on these. The aim here is to draw out any information that indicates if participants were previously reluctant to access services, but are now accessing Oasis.]
7. Can you comment on the level of impact that Oasis Townsville services have had on you and/or your family?
8. Is there anything Oasis Townsville could be doing to better provide support for you and your family?
9. Is there anything more you would like to add? Probing: Anything else that you'd like us to know about your experiences with the service delivery provided by Oasis Townsville?

### Nominal Groups

The nominal groups were run as a mixture of veterans and family members. The two questions posed were:

1. Nominal Group 1: What is the most important service provided by Oasis Townsville?
2. Nominal Group 2: Noting the following limitations, what would be the most valuable service to you that is NOT currently provided by Oasis Townsville?

### Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with veterans, family members and The Oasis Townsville staff. The questions were associated with the two broad research questions: 1) Has the VWC facilitated stronger connections between services and agencies? 2) How do relationships and networks facilitated by Oasis support veterans?

Specific questions were:

1. Please describe your involvement with Oasis Townsville, including how you became involved and your background.

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2. What do you think Oasis Townsville is doing well to support veterans, their families, and community?
  3. What do you think Oasis Townsville could be doing better to support veterans, their families, and communities?
  4. What are the biggest current challenges or barriers to success for Oasis Townsville?
  5. In your view, has Oasis Townsville facilitated stronger connections between services and agencies? If so, how? If not, how could it be done better?
  6. Could you please describe how you think relationships and networks facilitated by Oasis support veterans? [Prompt: Please provide specific examples]
  7. Are you able to comment on any difference you perceive between Oasis Townsville and other veterans' service organisations, either locally or more broadly?
  8. Is there anything more you would like to add?  
    Probing: anything else that you'd like me to know about your experiences with Oasis Townsville?