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ROYAL BRITISH LEGION AND MINISTRY OF DEFENCE ANNOUNCE NEW JOINT INITIATIVE TO HELP BEREAVED SERVICE FAMILIES

The Defence Secretary, Bob Ainsworth MP, today announced a new initiative which will help families who have lost loved ones in the Armed Forces by providing independent legal advice.

From next year, The Royal British Legion (TRBL) will offer a free Independent Legal Advice Service to bereaved Service families. TRBL's legal advisers will be available to give information and guidance, in particular about the inquest process, to ensure that families are fully prepared. Partially funded by the MOD, it will initially be available for a two-year trial period and will be carefully evaluated during this time to check that it is successfully meeting the needs of families.

Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth said:

“The inquest process can be daunting for families who have lost loved ones, and have already gone through so much. The Government is committed to giving them the support they need and deserve. I very much welcome the launch an Independent Legal Advice Service to help families understand the legal aspects of what is involved and I believe that TRBL are ideally placed to provide this service. We have been working closely with them on the proposal and are delighted to be able to contribute to the cost of the pilot.”

The initiative was conceived after TRBL and the War Widows Association of Great Britain organised a forum for Service families to talk about their experiences. Feedback from this forum showed that families felt there was an absence of independent expert legal advice. TRBL and MOD have since discussed how best to take this forward.

The Royal British Legion's Director General Chris Simpkins said:

“Over the next two years, the Legion will be providing the majority of the costs of this service – some £75,000 annually. At the same time, we're delighted to have the backing of the MOD for such a worthy cause.

“Our aim is to ensure that bereaved Service families are satisfied that a full and transparent inquest has taken place and that lessons are reported to, and acted upon , by the MOD.”

This trial reflects the Government's broader commitment to support service personnel and their families which was laid out in the Service Personnel Command Paper, published in July 2008. The

MOD will fully support this initiative but will play no part in the running of the service in order to ensure that advice remains independent and impartial.

TRBL and MOD believe that the Independent Legal Advice Service will make a real and worthwhile contribution to the support which is available to Service families who have lost loved ones.

NB:

1. The Independent Legal Advice Service will be available to the families of all those who have lost their lives in Service, whether or not the death occurred on operations. It will be in place in the late Spring/early Summer of 2010.

2. Bereaved family members will be able to contact the RBL legal advisers by phone or by e-mail, and arrange face-to-face meetings. The MOD and RBL will aim to make sure – for example through MOD Visiting Officers, written material and relevant websites – that families understand what the service provides, and that it is available if they want to use it. The service will be free.