



RACO Presentation to Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence: 30 May 2019

A Chathaoirleach, Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil libh as ucht an chuiridh a thug an coiste dom labhairt anseo inniu. I am honoured to address the joint committee on behalf of the Officers of Óglaigh na hÉireann to highlight the current Retention Crisis affecting all ranks of the organisation and thank it sincerely for its invitation. It has been heartening to note the interest that Committee members have in the welfare of Defence Forces personnel, and these loyal citizens need your support, now more than ever. I am joined by Lt Col Derek Priestley, Deputy General Secretary of the Association, and by Commandant Shane Keogh, RACO President.

In discussing the retention crisis, I will also touch on a number of contributing factors, including the lack of viable or credible retention policies within the Department of Defence, and the weakened industrial relations status of the DF Representative Associations which has been sadly exploited by Government to the detriment of the wellbeing of the Officers, soldiers, sailors and aircrew of Óglaigh na hÉireann, and which has left the State vulnerable.

'Train people well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so they don't want to.'

Although Richard Branson may not be viewed as an eminent military strategist, these words attributed to him are quite apt in this context. In the Defence Forces, we train our people to the highest standard, at no small cost to the Exchequer. We align their qualifications with best industry practice and academic accreditation, thereby satisfying the first criterion of this quote; Then we fail miserably in the second part. The **Dysfunctional Cycle of Turnover** being suffered by the DF, identified by University of Limerick researchers in 2015 and 2017 has continued unabated, to a point where Óglaigh na hÉireann is at its lowest strength in decades, and morale has certainly never been so low in my over 20 years' service as it is today. This trend appears set to continue according to numerous DF Employee Engagement Surveys and RACO's own recent research.

3,200 personnel left the Defence Forces between 2014 and 2018 which is an astonishing 34.7% of the average strength for those years. Before people think that this is due to the early mandatory retirement ages for DF personnel, I must state that **82% of these were premature voluntary retirements**. It was recently reported in numerous media publications that the unprecedented recruitment drive in 2017 yielded a single figure net increase in personnel, and that €15m was spent in that year on induction training. It may shock the Committee to learn that in 2018, the Defence Forces attempted to induct a similar number of candidates through a highly visible and professional recruitment campaign. Frighteningly, **last year saw a net loss of 120 personnel!**

In March of this year RACO reported to the PSPC that the Turnover Rate was a devastatingly high 8.1%. **It now stands at 9% overall, and 14% in the Naval Service.** For comparison, the UK MOD recently declared a **Retention Crisis at a turnover rate of 5%**. There were 256 discharges in the first four months of 2019. This is by far the highest figure since the reorganisation of 2012. In April 2019 alone there were an unprecedented **86 Discharges**. The impact of operating with reduced numbers is already being felt across the Defence Forces. The Army is struggling to fulfil its assigned tasks, domestically and internationally. Ships are unable to go to sea and aircraft are not flying as a result of personnel shortages. Yet the Department of Defence continues

to prioritise costly recruitment policies in favour of tangible retention initiatives. This historically high turnover rate is leading to the creation of a crippling operational and training tempo for remaining service personnel. When is the Government going to shout stop? Does it realise that Defence capability is being ground into the dust? Does it care?

Inadequate supervision and mentoring combined with inadequate trained manning levels leads to inevitable **burnout**, and creates serious concerns for **governance**, and the ability to manage **risk** and ensure the wellbeing of our personnel. The **UL Climate Survey** and Focus Group Reports laid bare the **mental health difficulties, increased stress and low morale** being experienced by Defence Forces soldiers, sailors and aircrew. Our people are double and treble jobbing in an effort to maintain operational output, due to inadequate trained manning levels in units.

According to the CSO, the Defence Forces has been the **lowest paid public sector organisation** for many years. This is ironic, when the IPA has consistently reported that the Defence Forces is by far the **most trusted public service organisation** in the State, with a 'trust score' of 82%. Something doesn't add up. **87% of all DF personnel earn well below the average public sector wage.** Senior Government officials have been heard to remark that *'someone needs to be the lowest paid'*. The fact that the lowest paid public sector organisation in the State is also the most defenceless in terms of advocating for its rights is deeply unfair and disrespectful to the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann, **many of whom are forced to rely on social welfare to support their families.**

Normal Public Service employment conditions do not apply to those in the Defence Forces. Serving Defence Forces personnel forfeit "normal employee status" while remaining subject to military law at all times. They have no right to strike and can be called on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days of the year. They have an unlimited liability contract which requires them to face hardship and danger for the benefit of others. The health and safety provisions of the EU Working Time Directive do not currently apply to the Defence Forces and the State is currently in breach of this EU legislation. Personnel are subject to mandatory early retirement (e.g. at 54 for Captain and 58 for Commandant) and are subject to annual (military standard) medical and fitness testing. **We voluntarily accept these unique constraints, but expect to be treated fairly in return.**

Defence Management's obligation, in recognition of these service restrictions and IR limitations, should be to advocate on behalf of Defence Forces personnel. What RACO Members see is an ongoing failure on the part of the Department of Defence to protect our weakened employee status, and in so doing to ensure that the Defence Forces are not disadvantaged relative to other Public Service employees. Indeed, the Department has taken advantage of the refusal of military personnel to withdraw labour. The Department's approach to representation, divisive, dismissive and sometimes subversive, has led to an **adversarial and dysfunctional industrial relations climate which has been to the detriment of the well-being of the most loyal citizens of this State.** It is nothing short of shameful. I am happy to elaborate further if required by the Committee. The Department of Defence has failed to prioritise retention for the Defence Forces even though it is evident that the continual recruitment campaigns are failing to address the ongoing reduction in overall strength, particularly where the underlying reasons for the continued exodus of personnel also remain unresolved. Why, when the Department of Defence saves millions every year on the backs of its employees (€26.5m in 2016), do they not see fit to introduce retention initiatives?

This approach is in stark contrast to our near neighbours across the Irish Sea, whose respect and value for their servicemen and women is enshrined in an **Armed Forces Covenant**, which recognises the freedoms

given up by military personnel and their families and the restrictions and hazards they face, but pledges to support, protect and treat them fairly. And let us not forget, **soldiers are citizens too**.

The State must reconsider how it values its Defence Forces, and what exactly it expects of them. Ireland spends a comparatively negligible 0.3% of GDP (lowest in the EU behind Luxembourg and Malta) on Defence, which speaks volumes about how seriously the State views the security of its citizens and economy.

Initiatives to increase numbers include **reducing the established benchmarks of entry standards, training standards and timelines**. The dilution of security clearance measures and the reduction in Recruit and Cadet basic training timelines had the objective of reducing the time to increase numbers. These measures have had no medium or long-term impact other than to potentially **expose the organisation to greater operational and organisational risk**. *No amount of water will fill a leaky bucket.*

In the face of strong objections by RACO, the Department enthusiastically dispensed with the internationally proven model of Fixed Period Promotion for Technical Officers of the Ordnance and Engineer Corps, leaving these Officers with no viable career paths; effectively showing them the door. These Officers are faced with a choice of returning to line units or leaving the Defence Forces if they wish to continue to advance their careers. In either event, 6 years of full-time training at significant cost to the Exchequer, in addition to several invaluable years of learning their trade are being lost.

DOD removed retention initiatives for Pilots, leading to a situation where the Air Corps is on its knees, with over 30% pilot deficiencies and counting, which coupled with chronic shortages in aircraft technicians has threatened operational capability and impacted on service delivery.

Despite the unprecedented levels of induction training, Officer Instructors continue to be denied **Specialised Instructor Allowance**, which was taken from them under Haddington Road and has yet to be reinstated. NCO Instructors continue to receive this payment, **but Officers bear the ultimate responsibility**.

But the single biggest factor negatively effecting retention in the Defence Forces, and hence the future viability of the organisation, is the removal of the **supplementary pension from post 01 Jan 2013 new entrants**. Government policy determines that all personnel are subject to early mandatory retirement ages (anywhere between their 54th or 60th birthday depending on rank). Hence the vast majority of post-2013 Single Pension Scheme officers will retire a full 10 years before they can receive the State Pension. A recent RACO Amárach Research survey found that a shocking **79% of Officers inducted since 2013 intend to leave the organisation well in advance of their retirement age**. The lack of an adequate pension provision for this cohort means that a significant majority feel that they have no future in the Defence Forces and will not stay long enough to develop and advance up the ranks and populate the chronic shortages at middle management level. **The unprecedented level of Cadet inductions and associated unbearable burden it has placed on training capacity will all have been for nothing**. To his credit, the Minister has recognised this, and has pledged to address it as a priority once pay issues have been resolved.

The White Paper on Defence 2015 notes at Section 7.3 that the recruitment, training and development, and retention of suitable military personnel are essential factors in developing the military capabilities required in order to discharge the roles assigned by Government. Despite this, no initiative or review has been initiated to address these issues. The delay in commencing White Paper Projects concerning the ongoing recruitment and retention issues is indicative of the current approach to Personnel Policy in the Defence Organisation.

The consequence to the organisation is the present “manning level crisis” and loss of corporate memory and military expertise on an alarming scale.

The Minister and his officials claim that this White Paper and the identified projects towards implementation are cognisant of the priority of demands. Why then has the Project Team failed to even commence the most critical and pressing Human Resource Projects which concern **retention**? None of the projects completed to date are assessed to have any significant impact on the Retention Crisis. The White Paper Implementation approach has not yet yielded any tangible impact on the Defence Forces. RACO views it as nothing more than a box-ticking exercise.

The cost benefit of retention is indisputable. The unique demands of Defence Force service require unique specialist “in house” military training and the development of military specialist skills. A direct entry civil engineer would have to undergo 20-24 months military training and professional development in military engineering competencies before being available for operational tasking. Similarly, the costs associated with developing the range of military competencies can amount to €1.54m for an Ordnance Bomb Disposal Officer at Captain rank, or €1.72m for a Captain Pilot in the Air Corps. These training costs do not take account of experience that is essential to ensuring safe operational output and risk mitigation (for both the individual and for the military unit with which they are employed). The cost of training one officer cadet is estimated at over €100,000 per student. At what point of dysfunction will management favour *retention* over the continual failing demands of *recruitment*? We cannot go to market to replace a middle manager such as an experienced Captain or Sergeant. We replace them with Cadets and recruits. At a turnover rate of 9%, the policy is destined to fail.

With this in mind, **a comprehensive external review, similar in nature and scope to the Gleeson Commission in 1990, or the recent Commission on Future Policing should now be considered by Government where Management are unable or unwilling to address the underlying organisational issues.**

The Defence Forces is currently surviving on the goodwill and loyalty of its personnel; that willingness to go over and above the call of duty to achieve the mission or complete the task. The inability of personnel to take to the streets in protest at their appalling service conditions has resulted in them voting with their feet and leaving the organisation. **It has however been humbling to witness the concerned efforts of veteran and family organisations in attempting to highlight the shameful treatment of service personnel. Their efforts have not gone unnoticed, and hopefully shall not be in vain.**

Mr Chairman, it is no exaggeration to state that **the Defence Forces is staring into the abyss.** The reported meagre recommendations of the Public Service Pay Commission have the potential, if implemented, to act as **a catalyst for further departures.** Government should be encouraged to ensure that the loyalty displayed by thousands of soldiers, sailors and aircrew is reciprocated, that they be **paid a living wage**, and that their skill and experience be recognised for the indispensable and irreplaceable asset it truly is. **RACO strongly recommends the adoption of a specific DF Pay Review Body, to ensure military personnel are fairly treated.** Unnecessary suffering is the worst kind, and Government has it within its power to easily remedy many of the retention difficulties being experienced by Óglaigh na hÉireann and to begin to rehabilitate this proud and loyal organisation. It is for Government to decide whether we are finally going to take the security of our State seriously and allow our Defence Forces to do what they signed up for: to strengthen the nation that they love, providing the security that allows our democracy and economy to flourish.

I thank you and the Committee for your time and I am happy to take questions.