

**Opening Statement by Chair of the Commission on Defence Forces
Joint Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence**

20th April 2021

Thank you Chair, and members of the Joint Committee, for giving me this opportunity to meet with you today. I know I speak for all members of the Commission when I say that your invitation is very welcome. I am joined here today by Cathal Duffy, the head of the Secretariat to the Commission.

I know that other members of the Commission are watching online and we are all very keen to hear the views of the members of the Joint Committee this afternoon. Meeting with this Committee is something that the Commission identified right at the outset as something that would have to be a key element of our consultation process. So, I'm genuinely very pleased to have this opportunity to hear your views this afternoon and to outline to you the work that the Commission has commenced. You will understand that I will not be in a position today to indicate any Commission findings or conclusions as our work is still at a relatively early stage.

As I am sure you are all aware, the Government established the Commission in December 2020 and has asked that we report by the end of this year. In establishing the Commission, the Government appointed 15 members who bring a great range of experience and expertise in key areas, including in senior management, HR Management, security policy, public service, as well as both national and international military expertise. As Chair, I feel very fortunate to

have such an extensive range of skills and experience amongst my fellow members.

While a 15 member Commission is quite large, and presents its own challenges in the current environment where meetings must be held virtually, it is also something of a blessing in that it allows us to undertake some work in a number of smaller sub-groups in a way that still ensures a good diversity of expertise in each such group.

The Commission has a very extensive agenda and, therefore, a very busy schedule and programme of work. In broad terms we see three phases to our work: firstly, issue identification, secondly detailed analysis and consideration of the key issues identified, and finally agreeing conclusions and preparing our report.

In this regard this meeting seems well timed. I say that because we are quite close to the end of the first phase of our work; that is the issue identification phase, and we are now embarking on a deeper dive into the analysis of the range of issues that we can most usefully deal with in our Report. The production of our Report, with conclusions and recommendations, is the third and final phase of our work and I see that commencing in early Autumn. In practice these three phases of work are not rigid and will to some extent overlap with one another.

You will no doubt all have seen our Terms of Reference, so I do not propose to go through these in great detail, but I would make some important points, or clarifications, in relation to them.

Our Terms of Reference are quite extensive; in fact they set out a challenging range of issues that we've been asked to address by Government. There are aspects of our Terms of Reference that address immediate requirements, while others focus more on the need to develop a longer-term vision for the Defence Forces out beyond 2030. Developing a longer-term vision for the Defence Forces of the future is very important given the dynamic changes, and the pace of change, in the security environment, including the emergence of new threats and new technologies and, of course, globally important issues such as climate change.

In broad terms, we have been asked to consider the appropriate capabilities, structures and staffing needed for our Defence Forces in the immediate and long term future. In doing so, we are to be guided by the national Defence policy framework and to be cognisant of developments in the current security environment. I want to emphasise that the Commission is future focused, but obviously starting from a realistic assessment of the current situation.

In developing our findings and recommendations, we are required to have regard to the level of funding provided by Government for Defence.

So, in accordance with our TOR, the Commission is approaching its work against the backdrop of Ireland's existing Defence policy, as laid down in the White Paper on Defence 2015 and the White Paper Update of 2019. As such, fundamental issues such as Ireland's policy of military neutrality are, of course, outside of our remit.

What is explicitly within our remit are issues around identifying, and making recommendations on, the capabilities and structures needed to ensure that the Defence Forces remain agile, flexible and adaptive in the face of the changing defence and security environment, and to ensure that they can continue to fulfil the roles assigned to them by Government, both now and into the future.

In relation to structures, we will be looking at the structure of each of the three services in the light of their current experience and best practice in comparable countries. In this, as in other work, we will also draw on material from the projects being undertaken on foot of the Defence White Paper and in the High Level Implementation Process by joint civ/mil teams from the Department of Defence and Defence Forces.

Our initial work on structures is focusing on issues that are cross cutting for the Defence Forces as a whole, including overall command and control systems and the important issue of “jointness”. The latter relates to the need for structures that facilitate a joint force approach across the traditional domains of land, air and maritime, as well as in the emerging domains of cyber and space. This is a significant focus in national defence strategies in many countries, especially in recent years.

Beyond these structural issues, our work on capabilities will require us to consider how our Defence forces are trained, resourced and equipped to undertake the tasks assigned to them by Government.

In relation to staffing and HR, a point that I should draw attention to is the fact that one issue that the Commission does not have a remit to consider is rates of pay and allowances. That is clearly outside our Terms of Reference.

However, the Commission is asked to examine the evolution of the remuneration systems and structures currently in place. I mentioned earlier that we are now on the cusp of turning from issue identification to the analysis phase of our work, and, certainly, it is clear that one of the issues that emerged from the first phase of our work is the complexity of existing remuneration structures, particularly concerning allowances. This is an issue that a Staffing sub-group of the Commission is looking at. In fact, the Staffing sub-group has a particularly busy programme of work facing it and I'm pleased to say it has begun making good progress in sifting through the substantial number of issues that have emerged. These include issues concerning the Working Time Directive, workforce planning, recruitment and retention, promotion, career planning and career progression, as well as issues of gender and diversity and much more. I should say that I do not think that the Commission will be able to address all the huge range of staffing and HR issues that have been raised with us, but we will attempt to focus our consideration and recommendations on the issues on which we feel we can be most impactful, within the terms of our TOR.

I would like to turn now to our work on the Reserve Defence Forces. As set out in our TOR the Commission will be looking at a wide range of range of issues in relation to the RDF and we aim to make specific recommendations intended to better leverage the capabilities of those Forces. It is of course too early to say what those recommendations will be. The approach we are currently taking is that all sub-groups, whether they are looking at capabilities, structures or

staffing, are tasked with addressing relevant issues in relation to the Reserve. Later in the summer, our intention is draw all of this together to ensure a clear and coherent set of recommendations on the RDF.

From the outset, the Commission's intent had been to visit military installations across the country in order to engage candidly with the women and men of all ranks across the Defence Forces. Clearly, our ability to conduct these visits has been severally constrained by Covid restrictions and, to date, just two visits have taken place – namely to Cathal Brugha Barracks in Dublin and Casement Aerodrome in Baldonnel. Nevertheless, we continue to plan for, and look forward to carrying out, a more extensive programme of visits, and meeting with as many personnel as possible in the coming months. As we did in Cathal Brugha and in Baldonnel, we will be actively encouraging staff of all ranks to speak their minds in order to better inform our work.

I want to say how impressed I and the other members have been both with the quality of the people we have met on our two visits and on their very obvious dedication to, and pride in, the Defence Forces and the role they play in serving the people of this country. That has been genuinely inspiring for me and my colleagues and makes us even more determined to do our work with the same level of commitment.

Another key element of our engagement has been the public consultation process that we launched in January. I am very pleased to say that this has elicited a tremendous response with over 520 submissions received, including some from members of this Committee, which are very welcome. The Secretariat to the Commission is currently in the process of sorting and sifting

through the submissions and members of the Commission have also begun reviewing the responses. The Commission has already decided that these submissions should be published on our website and this process will get underway, in batches, commencing next month.

The past number of months have provided the Commission with much food for thought. We have had a very intensive series of meetings, including with the both Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces and the Secretary General of the Department and their senior management teams, as well as with senior officers from the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service and we also had a very useful engagement with the Defence Forces' Senior NCO Forum. We have also met with and listened to the views of the Defence Forces' Representative Associations, both Permanent and Reserve, and we will engage further with these groups as our work progresses.

Furthermore, just two weeks ago, we also held a webinar that, thanks to the Royal Irish Academy and the Institute for International and European Affairs, provided an opportunity for experts from outside of the Commission – both Irish and from further afield – to give us their views which proved extremely valuable. Indeed, it was very interesting to have such a rich and informed debate on security and defence matters; something I am sure many of you would agree is lacking in this country.

I want to stress that in all our work to date we have had tremendous support from our colleagues in the Department of Defence and in the Defence Forces. This support has been freely and jointly given to the Commission by the two sides of the Defence Organisation. I want to take this opportunity to record my

gratitude to the Secretary General and the Chief of Staff, and their colleagues, for this assistance. We will continue to engage with the Department and the Defence Forces as we proceed with our work, but our final conclusions and recommendations will be arrived at independently by the Commission itself.

Chair, and members of the Joint Committee, the Commission has done a lot of listening and reading over the past four months and we will do some more listening this afternoon. As I mentioned, we are now beginning to move into the analysis phase of our work and, as we do so, it would be very helpful to us to have the views and advice of members of this Committee, who, I am sure, have also been hearing a lot about the same issues that the Commission must grapple with in the months ahead. I very much look forward to hearing, and taking on board, the perspectives of members this afternoon. I am very happy to take any questions that members may have in relation to the Commission's approach to this important task.

Thank you, Chair.

ENDS