



## JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

OPENING STATEMENT 29 JUNE 2021

**Chairman, members of the Committee, and members of the Secretariat, we are privileged to be afforded the opportunity to join you today to give the perspective of the Officers of Óglaigh na hÉireann on current retention issues affecting our members and the Defence Forces.**

The Defence Forces have been in a state of slow decline for almost a decade, and it has reached the point where this decline is becoming irreversible. Numerous reviews and Commissions have touched on the root cause of this decline, without actually addressing it; the failure to adequately resource Defence in order to retain highly qualified and experienced personnel to maintain capability.

RACO represents 95% of all Defence Forces Commissioned Officers and had the honour of addressing this Committee just over two years ago in May 2019. At that time, it was an accepted fact that the Defence Forces was in a manning level crisis. We were then awaiting the report of the Public Service Pay Commission, which ultimately proved to be a major disappointment. The measures contained within the report fell well short of what was required, and many still have not been implemented two years on by military and civil senior management, who continue to refuse to engage meaningfully with the representative associations. This has seen a scarcely believable deepening of the crisis, with the organisation's strength having fallen further still to its current low of approximately 8,500, with only around 8,200 of these deployable. We ask ourselves, have we reached the bottom yet?

Although we are dealing with an organisation in crisis, the DF still has many positive aspects. There are few careers today that can offer the sense of identity, camaraderie, and individual and collective pride that a life in the Defence Forces can. There is much that we do well as an organisation, from training and education to overseas deployment, maritime security and emergency aeromedical service, but we are undermined by a lack of investment, resources and contingent capability. Our members are undervalued and overstretched and are leaving the Defence Forces for more stable opportunities in the public service, or better paid positions in the private sector at an unsustainable rate.

RACO's mission is "to champion the wellbeing of our members" and our key message is that the resourcing, remuneration, motivation and retention of our personnel is critical to saving our Defence Forces and ensuring its viability into the future. It is our firm belief that without adequately trained, motivated and incentivised personnel, there can be no Defence Capability.

The greatest challenge to the Defence Forces today is simply staffing its appointments, particularly at the junior officer and NCO level. It has been demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that we cannot hope to recruit our way out of this retention crisis. The White Paper on Defence states that *'the most fundamental requirement and a critical factor for success is well trained, motivated, experienced and capable personnel with a wide range of skills and experience in order to successfully deliver government requirements'*. However, the increased rates of voluntary departures and rapid induction over the past number of years mean that 24% of all operational

personnel in the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service have five years' service or less. For Officers, it is even more stark. Since the commissioning of the latest extraordinarily large cadet class, 35% of all Commissioned officers have less than 5 years' service. This has severe implications for governance and supervision and increases organisational risk. It is telling that of all the White Paper projects reportedly closed thus far, five years into the process, none have had any tangible impact on the retention of personnel.

The Dysfunctional Cycle of Turnover, identified by UL researchers in 2016, has led to an ever-decreasing pool of suitably qualified and experienced personnel, and in an organisation whose stock in trade is the profession of arms and the management and execution of lethal force, this is a grave risk. Between 2016 and 2020 the organisation inducted 3,116 personnel while losing 3,679 (41% of the average strength for those 5 years). This rate of churn has also led to a crippling recruitment effort, delivered by our members, but no amount of water has been able to fill the leaky bucket that the organisation has become.

Our members are called on by the Minister to care for and mould the countless cadet and recruit inductees that are inflating strength figures, yet are refused Specialised Instructor Allowance, which was taken from Officers under Haddington Road and has yet to be reinstated. NCO Instructors continue to receive this payment, but Officers bear the ultimate responsibility.

When we look at the cost of training an officer, the cost benefit of *retention* over *recruitment* is self-evident. 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. The cost to train a specialist officer in Engineering, Ordnance or Communications is significantly higher. The high rate of Turnover has created significant manning level gaps in both line operational and technical units. We aspire to be tech enabled but cannot train and retain sufficient technicians to maintain our current equipment. Technician training and incentivised retention packages are urgently required for both line and specialist officers.

The solution to this staffing crisis was to be the High-Level Implementation Plan, which has unfortunately been allowed to fail by Defence senior management, through a lack of institutional and political will to resource it, and an absence of meaningful oversight. Having 7 of 15 projects still behind schedule 2 years into a one-year plan would be unacceptable at any time, but the fact that this is occurring in a government plan sponsored and monitored by the Department of An Taoiseach, in the face of the well documented DF recruitment and retention crisis is unconscionable. This does not bode well for future expansion to meet unmet defence and security needs that the ongoing Commission on the Defence Forces will likely identify.

Our military structures need significant adjustment. Critical to the majority of the significant HR issues in the Defence Forces at this time is a lack of contingency built into the establishment. The Employment Control Framework was imposed at a time of severe financial crisis and is no longer fit for purpose. The 2012 re-organisation cut what was seen as the 'fat' of the organisation at the time, seeking a 'lean' organisational structure. In an organisation which has been structured on a 'lean' basis, every appointment has been deemed essential. Thus, the removal of any personnel to fill a non-establishment vacancy (such as overseas or training courses, and most recently the establishment of a Joint Task Force) strips away an essential employee from their normal place of work. Consequential staffing gaps have direct impact on welfare and morale of personnel,

exacerbating the dysfunctional cycle of turnover. Trainees should *not* be part of the DF reported strength as this provides a misleading perspective on the strength and health of the organisation. Indeed, the high level of inductees in training further diminishes capability as those personnel that are required to instruct are also removed from day to day operations. In most instances there are not dedicated appointments for this training.

The pay determination model that applies to the public sector is a 'catch-all' model that *fails to catch all* the public service, and the worst off in this model is the Defence Forces. Our members willingly forego the right to industrial action and submit themselves to abide by Military Law. They are subject to mandatory selection for overseas service, required to achieve strict annual medical and fitness standards, are subject to compulsory random drug testing, are liable to be posted away from family for extended periods of time and bear an unlimited liability in their service to the State, ultimately willingly volunteering to place themselves in harm's way. Unfortunately, this loyalty and commitment to serve has attracted much praise but little else from successive governments.

The only way for the DF to become 'an employer of choice' as envisaged by the High-Level Implementation Plan is to compensate for the restrictions of military service by breaking relativities with other public sector bodies. RACO welcomed the commitment in the programme for Government to a standing independent pay review body but fails to understand how such a body can recognise the unique nature of military service, while remaining within national wage structures, as envisaged. Such a mechanism for pay determination must deal with the unique retention issues that the DF experiences in isolation, or it cannot and will not work. Our members noted with dismay the appalling treatment of the Defence Forces in the recent pay negotiations, despite pronouncements by relevant Ministers both verbally and in writing that there would be parity of esteem and fair treatment.

The removal of a supplementary pension provision means 79% of Post 2013 DF Officers are planning to leave the organisation well in advance of their mandatory retirement age, due to inadequate superannuation provisions. To put this in context, this cohort makes up 45% of our membership. This is the ticking retention time-bomb that will undo any other good work done by our members who have driven themselves into the ground to facilitate the unprecedented induction training levels. If this is not resolved, then all the effort put in to inducting and training the recent extraordinarily large cadet classes will have been for nothing. It is the very antithesis of '*Value for Money*' and threatens future organisational viability. It is a significant barrier to retention of our members and reflected in the finding of our recent Exit survey that 30% of retiring DF officers would NOT recommend a career in the organisation to family or friends, and a further 34% would do so only with significant improvements in conditions.

The Working Time Directive sets out limits on the number of continuous hours employees can work over certain periods. It is clear that in the current environment, the Defence Forces cannot meet the requirements of the Directive and maintain its operational outputs. What is equally clear is that a failure to provide adequate rest and compensatory time off to military personnel is significantly impacting their home-life and the ability of many to maintain a career in the Defence Forces. For too long management has treated members' time as an infinite resource, without consideration of work life balance, and the fact that our organisation has never even recorded working time, in contravention of EU law, has denied our members access to benefits such as overtime which are available to other public sector employees. The current strength of the Defence

Forces is well below the minimum establishment. What is not reflected though, and what the implementation of the WTD will reveal, is just how inadequate that establishment actually is. RACO has attempted to seek engagement on the implementation of the Directive with civil and military management in a reasonable and collaborative manner through the Conciliation and Arbitration Scheme for many years without success, which has necessitated the commencement of legal proceedings to vindicate the rights of our members.

Enhanced capability ensures the protection, health, safety, and wellbeing of our personnel, inspires pride in the service, and improves retention. Critical enablers possessed by normal military forces such as strategic airlift are not only logistical and strategic assets, but they also enhance the wellbeing of personnel by ensuring that they can be deployed and recovered from overseas missions in a safe and timely manner.

Government spending on Defence, at less than 0.3% of GDP, is dangerously inadequate by any measure. What defence services do we not provide the citizens of this State that other EU armed forces provide, and does this capability gap pose any strategic risks to Ireland and our EU partners? We must never apologise for the maintenance and resourcing of the State's insurance policy. Examples include our lack of cyber defence capability, airlift or primary radar or intercept to monitor and police our own airspace. The Chief of Defence should be made the Accounting Officer for a significant operational share of the Defence budget, with emphasis on operations, capital expenditure and infrastructure. Furthermore, we cannot continue to rely on pay savings to fund capability development.

The Army is required to maintain a contingent capability in order to be able to discharge its primary role "To provide for the military defence of the State from armed aggression"<sup>1</sup>. There are very significant capability and capacity deficiencies within the Brigades. The Defence Forces current level of deployment on overseas operations is significantly higher than that of comparable militaries. Our members are proud of our record of service; however, the retention crisis has resulted in a significant impact on the frequency with which our personnel are required to travel. According to military management, in 2020 almost 25% of the deployable Army strength deployed overseas.

The Naval Service must be equipped, prepared and able to respond or counter identified threats. However, it has 9 ships, but barely an establishment for 6 and is therefore set up to fail. A lack of resilience in human resources has plagued Naval Service operations in recent times, with patrols being cancelled due to the lack of suitably qualified and experienced personnel and two of our State's national fleet being tied up for the long term. This has a huge effect on the ability to conduct Maritime Defence and Security Operations effectively and safely and cannot be allowed to continue.

The Air Corps has no primary radar or intercept capability. Coupled with these deficiencies, the State's capacity for air mobility remains inadequate, leaving the air domain open to exploitation by any hostile actor or element. By formulating a whole of State policy assigning specialist aviation roles such as Search and Rescue to the Air Corps, there are mutual benefits to be achieved for the State, the Defence Forces, the Air Corps, and importantly, the personnel who deliver these services.

---

<sup>1</sup> White Paper 2015, Ch 5.

Our Infrastructure is in dire need of an overhaul. The DFTC, for example is in a dilapidated state due to lack of investment. The nineteenth century structures are in urgent need of repair, and demolition in many cases. Our stock of accommodation is insufficient for our personnel needs throughout the country. If the Defence Organisation is serious about Dignity in the Workplace, and the health, safety, and welfare of its people, then it has a lot of work to do. Much of it comes down to an apparent policy of managed decline. The failure to replace civilian tradespeople as they retire has also severely curtailed the maintenance and upkeep of our facilities. Our people deserve to feel good about the conditions in which they live and work. In too many locations, this is simply not the case.

The ongoing Commission on the Defence Forces, which RACO called for in our previous appearance before this esteemed Committee, is currently examining what the State wants us to do, and what resources are required to execute the mission. If we are to be serious about defence and security, then there is major surgery, and enormous investment required in Defence Forces Capabilities, Structures and Staffing. We have allowed this proud organisation to deteriorate to an alarming degree, through a mixture of unsuitable policy, comparatively poor pay and conditions of service and a failure to invest in our people and structures. The Commission must be bold and ambitious in its recommendations, if it is to make any tangible impact on a problem that is becoming unfixable. We note that the Terms of Reference state that “in arriving at its findings and recommendations for arrangements for the effective defence of the country, the Commission will have regard to the level of funding provided by Government for Defence”. We earnestly hope that this funding will be adequate to meet the demands generated by the expert’s recommendations, and these recommendations will not be constrained by the resources allocated.

Planning without resources is simply dreaming; we have a poor track record of policy implementation in the Defence Sector; from the White Paper on Defence to the High-Level Implementation Plan. The Commission’s recommendations must be fully resourced and accompanied by a strong implementation oversight body, to ensure that its good work is not allowed to wither on the vine. If that occurs, then there could be a bright future ahead for Óglaigh na hÉireann.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge the phenomenal efforts of all of our members who continue to put their shoulders to the wheel for the State during the pandemic response, and in their normal day-to-day roles. From testing, tracing, vaccination and logistical support to the HSE, they have all truly done the nation proud, and are owed a debt of gratitude, not just flattery. The versatile and steadfast insurance policy that the Defence Forces provides to the State has been highlighted time and again. We cannot allow the likes of COVID-19 and the inevitable shock to the public finances to be a reason not to invest in Defence. On the contrary, it is specifically for ‘Black Swan’ events such as a global pandemic that we need the robust national insurance policy that the Defence Forces provides. We must acknowledge and reward our people’s efforts in facilitating the organisation’s essential contribution to national resilience (notwithstanding the inadequate Defence Budget) and argue that the insurance policy which the State demands from the Defence Forces can only be comprehensive if it is properly funded and resourced.

I would like to sincerely thank the Chair and Committee members for their time. We are happy to take any questions from the Committee members.