

## **OPENING STATEMENT – Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence**

Chairman, members,

I very much welcome this opportunity to engage with the members of the Joint Committee on matters relating to the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, and I look forward to hearing the contributions of members today.

The establishment of a Commission on the Defence Forces was set out in the Programme for Government and was a key priority for me as Minister for Defence. When the Commission's report was published in February of this year, it recommended widespread and unprecedented changes for the Defence Forces and Defence provision in Ireland. The report contained 130 recommendations in total, and these ranged from reform of high level command and control structures to revitalisation of the Reserve Defence Force. However, the overarching theme was the urgent need for cultural transformation within the Defence Forces.

At the time of the Report's publication, I made a commitment to revert to Government with a Memo for Government detailing a proposed response to the Commission's recommendations, and a high-level action plan. Since then a significant body of work has been progressed by myself, my officials and the Defence Forces culminating in the approval of the memo and high level action plan on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July of this year. The Government approved a move over a six-year period to a level of Defence Forces' capability equivalent to 'Level of Ambition 2' (LOA2), as set out in the capability framework devised by the Commission, which will entail funding increases to reach a defence budget of c. €1.5 billion (at January 2022 prices) by 2028 through the annual Estimates process. This represents the largest funding increase for Defence in the history of the State. This afternoon I would like to talk about the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces and the subsequent Government response, and the significant progress that has been made since publication.

## **The Commission**

As you will all know, in December 2020 the Government authorised the establishment of the Commission and agreed its terms of reference and membership. The terms of reference covered the structures and size of the Defence Forces, defence capabilities, HR policies and strategies, the Reserve Defence Force, governance and high level command and control in the Defence Forces and pay structures. The work of the Commission was carried out against the backdrop of the Defence Policy Framework set out in the White Paper 2015 and the White Paper Update 2019, both of which were developed by joint Civil and Military teams.

## **The publication of the Commission Report and Security Environment**

The publication of the Commission's report last February represented the culmination of 13 months of intensive and dedicated work carried out by the Commission members. The report was wide ranging, challenging and comprehensive and proposed significant changes for the Defence Forces and Defence provision in Ireland. The illegal invasion of Ukraine within weeks of the publication of the report acted as a catalyst that brought defence matters to the forefront of public discourse. With the deterioration of the international security environment, nations across the world reassessed their defence capabilities, and Ireland was no exception. The Commission's finding that Ireland's Defence Forces would be unable to conduct a meaningful defence of the State from a sustained act of aggression by a military force with its current capability brought the need for investment and transformation into sharp focus.

The report made a wide range of recommendations regarding high level command arrangements, Defence Forces structures, defence capabilities, the Reserve Defence Force, and funding with a significant proportion of the recommendations focussed on strategic HR and cultural change. The Commission identified the urgent need for clarification of the levels ambition for the Defence Forces, and in the absence of such clarity they created a framework focussed around three Levels of Ambition (LOA), the first of which, LOA1 represents Ireland's current capability, LOA2 represents enhanced capability, and LOA3 which represents funding on a par with similar countries in Europe. One of the key recommendations of the Commission was that consideration be given to a move to LOA2 in the short term, and the Commission also recognised that any

proposal to move to LOA3 could only be considered in the context of a step up to LOA2 in the first instance.

Due to the large number and wide ranging nature of the recommendations, many of which were highly complex, a period of 5 months was required to give the recommendations detailed consideration and to develop a High Level Action Plan.

### **The Response to the Commission's report and High Level Action Plan**

Following the publication of the report, I engaged extensively with Ministerial colleagues, and other stakeholders including representative associations. A civil-military team was also established to work on the response to the recommendations, and the High Level Action Plan. This involved extensive engagement across the Defence Organisation, as well as with a wide range of other stakeholders and Government Departments, including the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Following detailed analysis of the recommendations and extensive engagement with stakeholders, the High Level Action Plan set out a position of 'Accept', 'Accept in Principle', 'Further Evaluation' or 'Revert' for each of the 130 recommendations. I am very pleased to say that 103 of the 130 recommendations were either accepted or accepted in principle, with 17 subject to further evaluation. I will be reverting to Government with proposed responses to the remaining 10 recommendations at a later stage.

The Commission's report identified five core areas to be addressed in an implementation plan, which were captured in the High Level Action Plan as five strategic objectives, which are: Strategic HR and cultural change to be delivered; New Command and Control and joint structures to be established; Services to be reformed and restructured; Reserve Defence Force to be Revitalised, and Joint Capability Development to be implemented.

The High Level Action Plan set out Initial Implementation and Oversight structures including a High Level Steering Board chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach, an Implementation Oversight Group with an Independent Chair and the establishment a civil-military Implementation Management Office.

The High Level Action Plan also identified 38 ‘Early Actions’ to progress a number of key recommendations from the Commission’s report, which will also provide the necessary building blocks to develop an implementation plan within 6 months of the Government decision.

A number of key appointments were proposed in the High Level Action Plan in order to progress the implementation of the recommendations and the transformation agenda, including a civilian Head of Transformation, a civilian Head of Strategic HR, and a Gender Advisor who will all report directly to the Chief of Staff. A Digital Transformation Officer will also be required to lead the digital transformation agenda, and will report directly to the Head of Transformation.

### **Decision and Implementation**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of July of this year I brought a Memo for Government and High Level Action Plan detailing the proposed response to the Commission’s Report, which was approved. As I mentioned earlier, the Government approved a move over a six-year period to a level of Defence Forces’ capability equivalent to ‘Level of Ambition 2’ (LOA2), as set out in the capability framework devised by the Commission, which will entail funding increases to reach a defence budget of c. €1.5 billion (at January 2022 prices) by 2028 through the annual Estimates. This represents the largest increase in Defence funding in the history of the State, and provides the essential financial support required to deliver LOA2. A number of measures relating to pay and allowance structures have also been accepted for implementation.

The move to LOA2 also entails an increase of some 2,000 personnel above the current Permanent Defence Force establishment of 9,500. It is clear that a significant task lies ahead for the Defence Forces and my Department. Implementation of the recommendations requires significant resources and expertise, both internal and external. The Department has a significant role to play in enabling, supporting and overseeing progress of the transformation agenda. To do this, it too will require additional resources.

I believe we are currently in a strong position to deliver this unprecedented transformation, thanks in no small part to the leadership and strong working relationship displayed by the Secretary

General and the Chief of Staff, who have been drivers and champions of the transformation agenda within the Department and the Defence Forces.

Finally, Chairman, I would like to thank you for inviting me here today and I look forward to hearing Members' thoughts and views on matters relating to the Commission on the Defence Forces. I have tried to touch on a number of issues, and I would be delighted to address these and any further issues of interest to Members.

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