

## **Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence**

### **Opening statement regarding Civil Defence, 07 March 2023**

#### **Introduction**

Mr Chairman and members of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, thank you for your interest in Civil Defence. My name is Aileen Nolan. I am Director in the Department of Defence. I am joined by my colleagues Ms Emer Dalton and Mr Aidan Dillon from the Department's Civil Defence Branch.

I am also joined by Civil Defence Officers Mr Niall Twomey from Cork County Council and Mr Fergal Conroy from Offaly County Council and finally, I am joined by Mr Dennis Keeley, Chief Fire Officer, Dublin Fire Brigade.

Officials from the Department of Defence met with your Committee here on the 4<sup>th</sup> October last for the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Civil Defence Bill.

#### **Strategic Direction of Civil Defence**

As outlined at my previous appearance, Civil Defence is a statutory volunteer-based organisation. There are a number of key documents which provide detail on the strategic direction of Civil Defence, these include the White Paper on Defence 2015 and Civil Defence - Towards 2030.

In the White Paper on Defence 2015, the Government committed that the future of Civil Defence will continue to be developed around its central strategic objective of supporting the Principal Response Agencies (that is An Garda Síochána, the HSE and the Local Authorities), government departments and state agencies in a variety of emergency and non-emergency situations. This embraces the large number of support roles under the Framework for Major Emergency Management (MEM) including assistance in dealing with a wide range of emergencies at national and local level, including severe weather, flooding and searches for missing persons.

The Government also recognised the important role of Local Government in the management of Civil Defence and wished to support the continued role of local authorities in fostering the contribution of Civil Defence.

In line with this, the Department of Defence has regular engagement with the County and City Managers Association (CCMA) to discuss Civil Defence matters.

The Department of Defence also convenes the Inter Agency Guidance Team (IGT) twice a year. The IGT comprises representatives from the Civil Defence Branch of the Department of Defence, the Office of Emergency Planning, the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management, An Garda Síochána, the Defence Forces, the HSE, the CCMA, the Civil Defence Officers' Association and a representative of the Civil Defence volunteers.

The IGT helps to ensure that Civil Defence services and capabilities are developed in line with strategic objectives.

### **Policy**

A major policy document called “Civil Defence - Towards 2030” was published in 2020. The policy document, which is the outcome of a review initiated in September 2018, sets out Civil Defence roles and services into the future, that is:

- Emergency Response,
- Search and Rescue,
- Medical Response,
- Community Assistance,
- Radiation Monitoring Service

The review involved consultation with all stakeholders including Civil Defence Officers, Civil Defence Volunteers, the IGT, and the Principal Response Agencies.

An implementation plan for Towards 2030 was put in place by the Department. Examples of actions arising from the policy document include:

- Each Local Authority Civil Defence Unit should have trained personnel and equipment to allow it undertake each of the five core services.
- Review and establish an appropriate fleet size for Civil Defence.

The implementation plan is ongoing and updates on progress are provided to the IGT, CCMA and Management Board in the Department of Defence.

### **Operations**

The Civil Defence role in emergency situations is laid out in a number of national policy documents, namely ‘The Strategic Emergency Management: National Structures and Framework’ (2017) and a ‘A Framework for Major Emergency Management’ (2005).

The Framework for Major Emergency Management sets out common arrangements and structures for front line public sector emergency management in Ireland. The framework sets out that the Local Authority Major Emergency Plan should include details of Civil Defence resources and the protocol for mobilising Civil Defence should be included as part of the Local Authority Major Emergency Mobilisation Procedures.

Where resources permit and with the agreement of the local authority, Civil Defence will continue to support appropriate community events. These events can provide an opportunity for Civil Defence volunteers to practice their skills while contributing to the community

Each local authority has overall responsibility for the day to day operations within their area. These operations are carried out by the Civil Defence Unit in each local authority.

Civil Defence services are delivered at local authority level through the Civil Defence Officer, or ‘CDO’. The CDO is a fulltime employee of the local authority who works under the overall direction of the relevant Chief Executive.

In the past number of years, the Department of Defence has agreed to provide additional funding for the appointment of Assistant Civil Defence Officers (ACDOs). The funding is made available on the basis that the appointment of a permanent full time ACDO will improve the resilience and capacity of the Unit. 22 units have now appointed ACDOs.

There are 28 Civil Defence Units around the country based in their respective local authority. Some Units are shared by more than one local authority, e.g. in Dublin where there is a single Civil Defence Unit covering the four local authorities. Within the larger counties there are sub-Units based in different training centres. For example, Wexford Civil Defence has sub-Units in New Ross, Gorey, Enniscorthy and Wexford Town.

During 2022 Civil Defence volunteers completed 3,635 taskings. Support for Ukrainians was a major feature of Civil Defences work in 2022. Covid related work also continued in 2022 as did more regular work such as assisting the Gardai with missing person searches and community events.

### **Volunteers**

Volunteers are recruited, trained and managed locally. It is for each local authority to determine the appropriate number of volunteers in that County. In determining this number, factors that are considered include the geographic size, topography and population of the County. It also includes the activity in that County of other volunteer based organisations. For example, the Red Cross or the Order of Malta.

Civil Defence is comprised of 2,451 volunteers as at 24 February. In 2020 as part of the 3 year planning cycle in Civil Defence, each local authority confirmed the volunteer numbers required to deliver core services. The total figure was 2,857. Local authorities are currently submitting their Civil Defence plans for the period 2023 to 2025 and again they have been asked to identify the number of volunteers required in their Civil Defence Unit.

It should be noted that COVID-19 significantly restricted the ability for local authorities to recruit volunteers.

### **Accommodation**

In relation to the Accommodation for Civil Defence, it is stated in the White Paper on Defence that it is the responsibility of each local authority to provide suitable accommodation for their Civil Defence Unit.

In recent years, several local authorities have made significant investments in this area. For example, both Meath and Monaghan County Councils have recently built new training centres for Civil Defence, while Westmeath and Clare County Councils have purchased existing buildings and adapted them for Civil Defence use. Similar projects are expected to start in Cavan, Dublin and Laois.

While it is the responsibility of the local authority to provide accommodation, the Department of Defence provides some funding to support local authority efforts. Typical grant funding of €150,000 has been provided to assist with these projects in recent years.

The Department welcomes the investment made by these local authorities and is happy to engage on any proposed projects for counties which would benefit from further investment.

### **Plans and Priorities for 2023**

There are a number of national priorities for Civil Defence in 2023, these include:

- Civil Defence Bill 2023

As you are aware, the Civil Defence Bill is due to be examined by the Committee in three weeks. Currently the legislative basis for Civil Defence is comprised of the Air Raid Precaution Acts 1939 to 1946 along with amending legislation enacted in 2012. To reflect the current role of Civil Defence, there is a requirement for modern legislation.

- The launch of the Volunteer and Equipment Management System (or VEMS)

In March 2021, following a public procurement process, the Department entered into a contract with Codec for the provision of a new on-line Civil Defence volunteer and equipment management system (VEMS).

The system will allow for more efficient management of Civil Defence volunteers, their training and activities. It will also assist with equipment and vehicle management. Volunteers will have access to the system via their smartphone.

The system will also provide valuable management information, which will allow for the planning and resourcing of Civil Defence going forward.

There has been significant collaboration between the Department of Defence, the CCMA and Civil Defence Officers in developing this system. The new system is expected to go live in mid-2023

- Review of Local Authority Three Year Plans (2023 – 2025)

Local Authorities are in the process of submitting their three year plans to the Department. The Department of Defence will analyse these plans and use them for planning, for example to identify training needs for the coming years.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, there is significant work ongoing at both policy and operational level to continue to develop Civil Defence in its primary objective of supporting the Principal Response Agencies, government departments and state agencies during national, regional and local emergency and non-emergency events.

Thank you for your time.

Links:

White Paper on Defence 2015:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1b0dc6-white-paper-on-defence/>

Towards 2030 Policy Document:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f41dc-civil-defence-towards-2030/>

A Framework for Major Emergency Management:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/ca182-a-framework-for-major-emergency-management/>

Strategic Emergency Management Document:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/07dd1c-strategic-emergency-management/>