

OPENING STATEMENT – Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Chairman, members,

As Independent Chair of the Implementation Oversight Group for the Commission on the Defence Forces, I would like to thank you for inviting me to address the Committee today. It is a welcome opportunity to share the progress that has been made to date regarding the implementation of the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces as approved by Government, and I very much look forward to hearing the contributions of Committee members today. I am joined today by Assistant Secretary Eamonn Murtagh, one of the Department of Defence members of the Implementation Oversight Group, and Principal Officer David Byrne from the Department of Defence, who is a part of the Implementation Management Office. The Implementation Management Office provide the secretariat function to the IOG.

I have held the position of Independent Chair of the Implementation Oversight Group (IOG) since last November, and in total the group has met six times, the most recent meeting taking place just last Thursday May 25th. In my role as independent chair of the IOG, I ensure that the group meets regularly, reviews progress reports, oversees and provides input into the development of the detailed implementation plan for the Commission on the Defence Forces and reports into the High Level Steering Board.

The IOG benefits greatly from the wealth of experience and expertise of its members, which are drawn from within the Department of Defence, the Defence Forces and from across a number of Government Departments at Assistant Secretary General level or Military equivalent. The IOG meetings provide an excellent opportunity for members to provide input on specific recommendations from their Department's perspective, and on the development of the detailed implementation plan in general.

To date, the focus of the IOG has been the overseeing and driving of progress in relation to the implementation of the 38 Early Actions set out in the High Level Action Plan for the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces much of which has involved putting in place the foundations and structures to support the proposed transformative change. As you will be aware, the independent review group on dignity and equality issues in the Defence Forces published its report on 28 March. The Government agreed to establish an External Oversight Body of the Defence Forces on a non-statutory basis initially, in line with one of the 13 recommendations in the report. The Tánaiste has set out his view that the immediate establishment of this external oversight body is a critical element to driving the necessary culture change throughout the Defence Forces and increasing transparency and accountability. While my appearance today is in my capacity as the Independent Chair of the Implementation Oversight Group for the Commission on the Defence Forces, I have also been appointed as a member of this External Oversight Body.

Background

Before going into further detail regarding our progress to date, I would like to take the opportunity to provide context to the role of the Implementation Oversight Group and the work to date relating to the Commission on the Defence Forces. As you are all aware, the establishment of a Commission on the Defence Forces was a commitment in the Programme for Government.

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.

Following 13 months of intensive work carried out by the Commission members, the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces was published in February 2022. The report contained 130 recommendations in total, and recommended widespread and unprecedented changes for the Defence Forces and Defence provision in Ireland. The Commission emphasised the urgent need for cultural transformation within the Defence Forces.

In response to the report, a Memo for Government and a High Level Action Plan including a response to all 130 recommendations were brought to Government and approved on the 12th July last. 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 to be agreed through the annual Estimates process. This represents the largest funding increase for Defence in the history of the State.

The High Level Action Plan

The High Level Action Plan (or HLAP) which I have just referred to, was produced by a Civil-Military team comprising of personnel from the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces. The plan was launched following a period of extensive engagement across the Defence Organisation, as well as with a wide range of other stakeholders and Government Departments.

The HLAP noted that the Commission's report contained 69 main recommendations which together with sub recommendations, comprised 130 recommendations in total. The HLAP grouped all 130 recommendations under 5 strategic objectives:

1. Strategic HR and cultural change to be delivered;
2. New Command and Control and joint structures to be established;
3. Services to be reformed and restructured;
4. Reserve Defence Force to be Revitalised, and

5. Joint Capability Development to be implemented.

In addition to the five Strategic Objectives, a separate enabling workstream captured the necessary building blocks required for implementation of many of the recommendations within the report.

- Government Defence LOA Defined
- Implementation Structures developed
- Defence budget allocation agreed
- Key HR enablers developed
- Strategic Defence Review progressed

The HLAP set out a total of 38 early actions to be completed within 6 months of the Government decision.

The HLAP set out 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
- a civil-military Implementation Management Office.

The membership of the High Level Steering Board includes Secretaries General from:

- Department of the Taoiseach (Chair)
- Department of Defence
- Department of Justice
- Department of Environment, Climate and Communications
- Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform
- Department of Foreign Affairs
- and the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces

In addition to holding the position of Independent Chair of the Implementation Oversight Group, I also sit on the High Level Steering Board.

The purpose of the High Level Steering Board is to oversee the implementation of the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces as approved by Government. In addition to supporting and guiding the implementation, the Board will also act as a clearing house for issues that cannot be resolved or where particular blockages are being experienced in the implementation of the Commission's recommendations.

The purpose of the Implementation Oversight Group is to oversee and drive progress in relation to the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission.

The membership of the Implementation Oversight Group includes senior representatives from

- Department of the Taoiseach
- Department of Justice
- Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform
- Department of Foreign Affairs
- The National Cyber Security Centre

It also includes myself as the independent chair, two Department of Defence Assistant Secretaries, two Defence Forces Deputy Chiefs of Staff and will include the Defence Forces Head of Transformation who is due to be appointed shortly.

Detailed Implementation Plan

As I mentioned earlier, the High Level Action Plan also identified 38 ‘Early Actions’ to progress a number of key recommendations from the Commission’s report, which would provide the necessary building blocks to develop a detailed implementation plan. 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 the five strategic objectives that I referred to earlier. The detailed implementation plan will also be structured around these five strategic objectives.

Intensive work has been carried out on this plan over the last number of months. The Implementation Management Office have provided updates on the progress of the Implementation Plan to the IOG throughout the process.

As the Tánaiste has previously stated, and I wholeheartedly agree, it is important for this plan to be completed expeditiously, but it is more important that we get it right. This is particularly important in the context of the recent publication of the Report of the Independent Review Group on dignity and equality issues in the Defence Forces.

The detailed implementation plan will set out how the Commission's recommendations are to be delivered up to 2028. The scale of the

proposed transformation effort is unprecedented, and there is much work to do in the months and years ahead. While acknowledging the scale of the task that lies ahead, I would also like to take this opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved to date.

Key achievements

On the 23rd of March this year a comprehensive update on the 38 Early Actions was published. At that time, 80% of the Early Actions were fully completed, with the remainder substantially progressed. Since the publication of this update, a number of additional Early Actions have subsequently been completed including the design of Gender, Diversity and Unconscious Bias training and the commencement of the Strategic Defence Review.

Further progress on the early actions is ongoing. Throughout this Early Action phase, the Commission on the Defence Forces Implementation Management Office reported to the Implementation Oversight Group

regarding the progress and status of the Early Actions, including the development of a detailed implementation plan.

Some of the key achievements to date include:

- Government approval to move to 'Level of Ambition 2' (LOA 2) with funding to be increased to €1.5bn (in 2022 prices) by 2028, to be agreed through the annual estimates process, which represents the largest investment in Defence in the history of the state;
- The Head of Transformation and Head of Strategic HR positions have been advertised externally and substantially progressed with appointments to both of these roles to be made shortly. These positions are key to the success of the transformation programme;
- Recruitment and induction strategies have been developed encompassing advertising, expanded recruitment and induction capacity.

- The Office of Reserve Affairs has been established.
- Ministerial consent for Temporary Associate Membership of ICTU, for the purpose of participation in discussions on national pay agreements, was provided for the Representative Associations in May 2022.
- Pay has improved as a result of increases arising from the Public Service Pay Commission report, from recent pay agreements, and the early implementation of some of the recommendations of Commission on the Defence Forces (CoDF). The implementation of two of these recommendations, namely personnel of Private 3 Star/Able Seaman rank being paid the full rate of Military Service Allowance (MSA) applicable to the rank; and the removal of the requirement for that cohort to ‘mark time’ for the first three years at that rank, have had a substantial impact on starting pay rates in the Defence Forces, and compare very well to starting pay rates across the public service.

In addition, the Building Momentum Pay Agreement extension (October 2022) allows for increases in pay of 6.5% over the lifetime of the agreement. Since 1 March 2023, pay rates start at €37,147 in Year 1 for a recruit on completion of basic training (approx. 24 weeks); €41,123 for a school leaver cadet on commissioning and €46,406 for a Graduate Cadet on commissioning (all figures include Military Service Allowance which is pensionable).

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues on both the IOG and the High Level Steering board for their invaluable contribution to the process so far, and to acknowledge the importance of the collaborative work carried out by the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence.

As a group we have monitored the progress of the implementation of the Early Actions over the last number of months, and we are satisfied with the progress to date, with the vast majority of Early Actions fully completed and the remainder being substantially progressed.

The progress to date has laid strong foundations for the future work to deliver on this critical agenda.

The Tánaiste and Minister for Defence Mr. Micheál Martin TD has highlighted the importance of the recommendations of the Commission on the Defence Forces, and that the Strategic Framework being put in place to drive these through will be an important enabling mechanism for delivery of the Independent Review Groups' actions.

I understand that the Tánaiste's priority now is to ensure that there is one Strategic Plan for the transformation of the Defence Forces, fully understood by everyone, that has the appropriate governance and reporting mechanisms, and is properly resourced, that progress will be seen internally, and to be reported externally. Clear and irrefutable evidence of change on the ground is the only thing that will re-build the confidence of serving members and enhance the trust of the public who they serve.

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.