

Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence - 26 September 2023

Opening statement – Secretary General Jacqui McCrum

Chairman, members,

As Secretary General of the Department of Defence, I would like to thank you for inviting both myself and Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Seán Clancy to address the Committee today. We are also joined today by Brigadier General Rossa Mulcahy, Assistant Chief of Staff and by Principal Officer Emer Dalton.

This is a welcome opportunity to discuss the ongoing work of both the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces. It is particularly timely, given the Tánaiste today published the over-arching Strategic Framework for the transformation of the Defence Forces. I had made the Chair aware some weeks ago about the potential publication of this document and I hope that you have all received a copy which we were able to release once approved by Cabinet this morning.

Following the publication of the Report of the Independent Review Group on Dignity and Equality issues in the Defence Forces in March 2023 (the 'IRG Report'), The Tánaiste set out his priority to develop one Strategic Framework for the transformation of the Defence Forces, fully understood by everyone, which has the appropriate governance and reporting mechanisms, and is properly resourced.

He has stated that 'the priority within this transformation is cultural change above all else'. In addition to the culture change there are also transformation actions that will ensure that the Defence Forces is an equal opportunities employer, reflective of contemporary Irish society and that is, providing a safe workplace, a fit for purpose organisation equipped to defend the State and meet the challenges of today and the future. It will be an organisation

- where self-worth is actively promoted,
- where all members are treated with dignity and respect and,
- an organisation that continuously evolves to deliver positive change.

This journey of transformation has commenced, a lot of work has been done since the end of 2021 and continues to be my primary focus. The Strategic Framework clearly sets out the actions to be delivered before the end of 2024, i.e.:

- implement the recommendations of the IRG Report;
- implement the recommendations of the Commission on the Defence Forces (CoDF)
- support the recruitment to and retention of personnel to our Defence Forces;
- enhance the physical working environment and equipment of our personnel; and
- make the legislative changes to underpin the transformation agenda.

Strategic Priorities

While all the actions under the Framework are important, the core strategic priorities are:

- i. The specific actions to support cultural change within the Defence Forces to be implemented through a well-designed and expertly led culture change programme with oversight by the External Oversight Body
- ii. To stabilise the numbers of personnel in the Defence Forces in the short term and thereafter to increase the strength towards the level of ambition arising from the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces;
- iii. To implement a new independent, external complaints service for serving members of the Defence Forces and a new complaints process for civilians and civil servants ;
- iv. The implementation of an agreed policy for the application of the Working Time Directive within the Defence Forces with legislative underpinning.
- v. To progress specific projects to enhance the physical working environment and equipment of our personnel including specific capability enhancements across all Services, as set out in the CoDF report;
- vi. The legislative changes to support the transformation of the Defence Forces to be put in place including the statutory underpinning for

- a. the new high-level structures within the Defence Forces, and the consequential re-design of the governance and oversight framework for the new command structure,
 - b. the new independent complaints mechanism, and
 - c. the External Oversight Body.
- vii. The Judge led Tribunal of Inquiry to examine the effectiveness of the complaints processes in the Defence Forces into workplace issues relating to discrimination, bullying, harassment, sexual harassment and sexual misconduct is established.

Cultural Issues

The Government, in response to an IRG recommendation, has established the External Oversight Body (“EOB”) for the Defence Forces to drive the necessary culture change throughout the organisation and to increase transparency and accountability.

The Terms of Reference for the EOB were published on 12 July, and the Body is now embarking on the development of a Work Programme. To date, the EOB has met nine times. Legislation is now being developed to put this Body on a statutory footing.

Also in July, the Government approved, the establishment of a Tribunal of Inquiry, to examine the effectiveness of the complaints processes in the Defence Forces to address workplace issues relating to discrimination, bullying, harassment, sexual harassment and sexual misconduct.

The Tánaiste is considering feedback received from stakeholders in relation to the terms of reference for the Inquiry. He will revert to Government in the near future, seeking approval for the terms of reference and the appointment of a Judge to Chair the Tribunal.

Implementation of the recommendations of the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces

The Commission on the Defence Forces delivered its report in February 2022. In July 2022 the Government approved a High Level Action Plan (HLAP) to progress the 130 recommendations and to commit the State to move to Level of Ambition 2 with a commensurate increase of the Defence budget from €1.1 billion to €1,5 billion, in 2022 prices, by 2028. It is worth noting that the published High Level Action Plan identified 38 early actions, of which 95% are now complete and work on the Detailed Implementation plan is currently at an advanced stage

Ms Julie Sinnamon, Chair of the Independent Oversight Group briefed this Committee on 30 May 2023 in relation to the status of the Commission on Defence Forces [CODF] recommendations, therefore I don't propose to repeat the comprehensive update that was provided to the committee that day, I will instead focus on a number of key actions delivered under the CODF.

The implications of the working time directive on Defence Forces personnel

The Commission On the Defence Forces recommended the removal of the blanket exclusion of the Defence Forces from the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 and the Government has committed to this.

Extensive work by the military authorities has determined a high percentage of everyday work is in compliance with the Working Time Directive.

Recent European Case Law on military service has been clear that certain activities can be considered outside the scope of the Directive. The provisions of this Ruling have informed a proposed civilian-military management position, which has as its guiding principle, that appropriate health and safety rights and protections are afforded to serving members, while also ensuring the Defence Forces fulfil essential state functions.

The introduction of a robust time and attendance system is essential to ensuring that the provisions of the Working Time Directive are properly afforded to serving members. This and other areas of discussion are at an advanced stage.

Capability Development

A new permanent civil-military Capability Development Unit within the Department has been established, with a comprehensive strategy setting out Capability Development planning in to the future.

Allied to the Capability Development Unit, there is a significant capital investment programme ongoing across the Defences Forces, noteworthy projects include;

- The purchase of two C295 aircraft at cost of €228m. The first aircraft was delivered in June 2023 and the second is expected to be delivered in October 2023.
- Two Inshore Patrol Vessels have been procured for €26 million. The IPVs arrived in Cork in May 2023 and now require some remaining work before becoming operational in 2024.
- Accommodation provision at Mc Kee barracks and at Haulbowline, Naval Base
- MOWAG Gunnery Simulator in the Curragh

The Defence Forces Infrastructure Development Plan (IDP), focussing on building infrastructure, sets out a programme of project delivery for the years 2023 to 2027. The Plan estimates infrastructure requirements to be in the region of €300m for the coming years and there are currently over €130m worth of projects underway at different stages of development – projects underway include a new Cadet School HQ and new accommodation buildings in Dún Uí Mhaoilíosa in Galway and Collins Barracks

In terms of gender balance

- The current female strength in the Permanent Defence Forces is 7.26% of the force. To put this in an international context, as at 01 April 2023, Female representation in the UK Defence Forces stands at 11.5%.
- Gender Balance continues to be a key area of focus and the Department of Defence has led on a number of initiatives in this area, the management board of the Department has moved from 20% female representation to 57% within the last two years
- A currently thriving Civil-Military Defence Women's Network was established in 2022.
- Earlier this month, the Tánaiste announced that private secondary medical care would be extended to all ranks in the Permanent Defence Force. Importantly, this provides access to private maternity care for all females in the Defence Forces. This is a unique benefit in the public sector. It is a tangible recognition of the value we place on women and builds on the supports needed to attract and retain women in our defence forces. Female participation and career development is necessary for a modern-day defence force. It is, and will remain, a priority until the female strength in the permanent defence forces reaches a level comparable with the best international rates.

Current Retention measures, including remuneration and allowances in the Defence Forces

Significant enhancements to the remuneration and allowances in the Defence Forces, have been approved by Government;

- Recruits on completion of training (which takes approximately 24 weeks), now start at €38,000. A school leaver Cadet on commissioning is paid almost €42,000, and for a graduate on commissioning as a cadet, the initial starting salary will be over €47,000.
- Temporary Associate Membership of ICTU for the purposes of participation in national pay discussions for the Representative Associations was granted in May 2022.
- Increase in overall establishment in the Defence Forces to 9600 to support transformation work.
- A total of 152 officers and 449 enlisted personnel promoted in 2022. 107 of the enlisted promotions were to Senior NCO Ranks.
- A total of 196 officers were promoted to date in 2023 and 225 enlisted personnel were promoted to Corporal and Sergeant ranks.

My Department is continuously striving to support making the Defence Forces an employer of choice in an increasingly competitive environment for skilled young people. As referenced earlier, the Tánaiste has announced the commencement of private secondary medical care to all ranks in the Permanent Defence Force. Previously, this benefit was available to Commissioned Officers only. It will now apply to all personnel and will be of immediate benefit to a further 84% of the Permanent Defence Force, some 6,400 personnel based on current strengths.

This is a significant enhancement to the overall benefits package for personnel and is unique in the public sector. This is in addition to a number of other retention measures, including:

- Increase in mandatory retirement ages for Privates, Corporals and Sergeants
- Increase in general recruitment age to 29. Issues relating to upper recruit and retirement ages of the Reserve will also be considered, in the context of the development by the Office of Reserve Affairs, of a Regeneration Plan for the Reserve. These considerations will also have to have due regard to deliberations on the same matters for the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) which are ongoing.

- Service Commitment scheme for pilots in the Air Corps
- Sea Going Service Commitment scheme
- Tax credit for Sea Going personnel
- Extensive Education and Training opportunities

Much development work in the area of defence and security policy will continue to take place and will provide the future context for our Defence Forces. This includes policy development work flowing from the:

- Strategic Defence Review; In March 2023, the Department of Defence commenced a Strategic Defence Review, as part of the defence review cycle, which includes a wide-ranging assessment of the security environment and the threats facing Ireland.
- Consultative Forum on International Security Policy; In June 2023, the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence convened the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy to build public understanding and generate discussions on our foreign, security and defence policies.
- White Paper on Defence and its continued Implementation

In addition priority will be given to the legislative changes to support the transformation of the Defence Forces including the statutory underpinning for

- the new high-level structures within the Defence Forces, and the consequential re-design of the governance and oversight framework for the new command structure,
- the new independent complaints mechanism, and
- the External Oversight Body.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to discuss the significant and wide-ranging programme of work which is continuous across the Department and the Defence Forces in relation to transformation.

The last three years have been turbulent and unprecedented in many areas. It has been challenging for all involved. I am however confident that we are on the right path with actions to be taken to support the transformation of the Defence Forces into a fit for purpose organisation to defend the State and meet the challenges of today and the future.

Both the Chief of Staff and I have significant jobs of work in each of our areas of operation to deliver in order to complement and deliver this transformation. My team and I are committed to this programme of work and to working with the Chief, the Defence Forces Board and our Defence Force colleagues to achieve this mutual goal.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing Members' thoughts and views on matters raised here today.