

## **Statement by the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence Micheál Martin T.D.**

### **Appearance before the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence**

**17 October 2023**

I would like to thank the Committee for inviting me, in my role as Minister for Defence to address the Committee today. This is a welcome opportunity to discuss the ongoing transformation process and positive measures which have been implemented in relation to the Defence Forces.

Before I do so, may I take a moment to acknowledge the bravery and dedication of our Defence Forces. An essential element of their work is the contribution that they have made to peacekeeping for over more than fifty years.

I want to take this opportunity to put on the record my appreciation and that of the Government for the work being done by our peacekeepers, wherever they may be in the world but, particularly at this time, to those in the Middle East.

I also want to acknowledge the vital role played by their families, for many of whom the last ten days has been a particularly worrying time.

I want to assure them and the members of this Committee that their safety and security is our paramount concern. The Defence Forces' personnel in the Middle East region have been following UN advice at all times and will continue to do so.

### **Strategic Framework**

The work of our peacekeepers and the ongoing work of all our Defence Forces members, illustrates why it is so important to ensure the transformation of the Defence Forces into a fit for purpose organisation to defend the State and meet the challenges of today and into the future.

It is for this reason; I published the Strategic Framework on the Transformation of the Defence Forces in September.

As I have stated previously, my priority within this transformation is culture change above all else.

The framework consolidates into one document the immediate actions from the *Commission on the Defence Forces Report (CoDF)* and the *Report of the Independent Review Group on Dignity and Equality issues in the Defence Forces (IRG)*, alongside the efforts underway in recruitment and retention, and in enhancing the physical working environment and equipment of our Defence personnel.

The Framework has appropriate governance and reporting mechanisms, to oversee this transformation and bring transparency and accountability to the work.

In tandem with the transformation in the Defence Forces, an Organisational Capability Review of the Department of Defence was undertaken during 2021 and 2022, in order to build capability for the future.

Implementation of the recommendations is underway and will continue through 2024.

### **The Commission on the Defence Forces**

The Commission on the Defence Forces, published in February 2022, proposed sixty-nine main recommendations and overall, there were 130 recommendations in total.

Government approved in July 2022 a move to ‘Level of Ambition 2’ (LOA2) as set out in the Commission on the Defence Forces.

This will result in the Defence budget rising from €1.1 billion to €1.5 billion by 2028, the largest increase in Defence funding in the history of the State.

Government also approved a High-Level Action Plan which set out 38 Early Actions. These progress a number of the key recommendations from the Commission's report, whilst also providing a solid foundation on which to build a successful transformation programme.

To date approximately 95% of the thirty-eight early actions have been completed. The detailed implementation plan for the Commission's full 130 recommendations is currently being finalised, and I anticipate that it will be published later this month.

While the plan has not yet been published, work is underway on a third of the Commission's recommendations, with ten of the recommendations, already fully completed.

An Implementation Oversight Group and a High-Level Steering Board have been established to oversee and drive the transformation, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of both boards for their active engagement and commitment throughout the process.

### **The report of the Independent Review Group (IRG)**

The report of the Independent Review Group (IRG) established to examine dignity and equality issues in the Defence Forces was published following Government approval in March 2023.

The report made recommendations across a number of areas, which Government accepted. I want to focus on two specific recommendations here today.

The Government approved in July 2023, the establishment of a Tribunal of Inquiry, pursuant to the provisions of the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act, 1921 (as amended), 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.

I am continuing to consult with the Attorney General in respect of terms of reference for the Tribunal. I have met with a number of stakeholders and draft terms of reference were provided to a number of interested groups and individuals.

I received a number of submissions in relation to the nature and format of the Statutory Inquiry and I concluded that an open, independent, and transparent process is the best way to examine the issues raised.

I will revert to Government seeking approval for the terms of reference and the appointment of a Judge to Chair the Tribunal.

In addition, as part of the Government's immediate response to the IRG report, it approved the establishment of an External Oversight Body for the Defence Forces to drive the necessary culture change throughout the Defence Forces and to enhance transparency and accountability.

This is an essential part of the transformation of the current workplace to support current serving members.

The External Oversight Body is chaired by Prof. Brian MacCraith. Its Terms of Reference were published on 12 July last and to date the Body has met on eleven occasions. I met with the Chair last week to get the latest update on their work.

## **EU Working Time Directive**

Implementation of the provisions of the Working Time Directive for Defence Forces personnel, where appropriate, remains a key priority. The Strategic Framework for Transformation provides for an agreed civil/military management policy position on its implementation to be finalised by the end 2023.

The policy position has been informed by extensive work undertaken by the Military Authorities.

As the Committee is aware 80% of the everyday work of the Defence Forces is already in compliance with the Working Time Directive.

In addition, recent European Case Law on military service has been clear that certain activities due to their specific nature, can be considered outside the scope of the Directive.

As its guiding principle, the policy for implementing the provisions of the Directive will ensure the fundamental requirement for appropriate rights and protections with regard to health and safety, are afforded to serving members, while also ensuring that the Defence Forces can continue to fulfil their essential state functions.

This is a complex matter given the specific nature of some military activities. In this regard, dialogue has been continuing with the PDF Representative Associations and civilian-military management which has gained momentum in recent months.

Without doubt, the introduction of a robust system to record daily hours of attendance is an essential element for the Defence Forces, in ensuring that the provisions of the Working Time Directive are properly afforded to serving members.

To this end, I can confirm that Defence Forces management are progressing the introduction of an interim time and attendance system on a pilot basis which will inform future systems.

## **Gender Balance**

The Government remains committed to a policy of equal opportunity for men and women throughout the Defence Forces in order to increase capability and to better reflect the society from which they are drawn and serve.

As of 31 August 2023, 549 personnel or 7% of Permanent Defence Force personnel are women. While this percentage is not satisfactory, it is not out of kilter with standards across international militaries, for example, the percentage of women in the UK Armed Forces is 11.5%.

The Chief of Staff has signalled his commitment to increasing the female ratio to 9% this year and the roll out of focused initiatives to attract more women to join the Defence Forces has already begun.

### **Recruitment and Retention**

The unemployment rate is running at 4.2%, it is an extremely competitive labour market, and this is feeding into the recruitment challenges in the Defence Forces, and in the Naval Service in particular.

While acknowledging these challenges, this Government continues to work to counter these difficulties, and a suite of recruitment measures have been implemented.

Starting rates of pay in the Defence Forces compare very well to comparable rates of pay across the public service and indeed the private sector.

A school leaver Cadet on commissioning is paid €41,962, after two years they are promoted to lieutenant and their pay rises to €47,245.

Where a graduate join – the pay rate on commissioning begins at €47,245.

The maximum age of entry into the PDF has recently been increased to 29 years for General Service recruits and certain other entry ranks.

Other measures to improve recruitment numbers include some flexibility on fitness test scoring and, on a pilot basis for six months, the pausing of psychometric testing for Naval Service General Service recruitment, with a review thereafter.

Furthermore, external human resource expertise has recently been engaged to validate the current recruitment process with an initial focus on the Naval Service.

In addition to considerable progress on pay and other retention measures, I recently announced the commencement of private secondary medical care to all Defence Forces ranks.

This is a significant enhancement to the overall benefits package for personnel and is unique in the public sector.

It continues the significant progress being made by Government in improving the employment conditions of Defence Forces personnel.

The Naval Service has recently adopted a three-ship posture with two ships operational and another ship on standby, in order to streamline operations, bolster existing capabilities, and ensure optimal resource allocation in the Naval Service.

Despite ongoing recruitment and retention challenges, the Naval Service continues to conduct maritime surveillance and fisheries patrols in the Irish Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The Irish Naval Service Fisheries Monitoring Centre in Haulbowline continue to remotely monitor vessels in the Irish EEZ on a 24/7 basis, augmented by aerial monitoring and surveillance of the Irish EEZ by the Air Corps Maritime Patrol Squadron using the two CASA CN 235 Maritime Patrol Aircraft, which are being replaced with two new C295 maritime patrol aircraft equipped with state-of-the-art surveillance and communication equipment.

The recent successful interagency operation conducted using Naval and Air Corps assets and interagency personnel, including the Army Ranger Wing, illustrates the effectiveness of intelligence led operations.

The allocation of €1.23 billion in Budget 2024 further demonstrates this government's commitment to Defence.

This funding will facilitate the ongoing investment in our defence capabilities along with allowing crucial progress in the transformation of the Defence Forces, as outlined in the Strategic Framework.

This is just an overview of the comprehensive work being undertaken in relation to Defence and I welcome any questions or comments from Committee members.