

Chairman and Committee Members,

I welcome this opportunity to engage with the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to consider the 2024 Revised Estimates for the Defence Vote Group. I have a short opening statement that sets out the overall position and updates members on some recent developments within the Defence Sector.

Last September, the **Strategic Framework - Transformation of the Defence Forces** was published. This document clearly outlines the vital work that is underway relating to the cultural transformation of the Defence Forces and outlines the necessary actions to be delivered by the end of 2024 to ensure dignity in the work place is maintained and respected.

It covers the recommendations made in the *Report of the Independent Review Group on Dignity and Equality issues in the Defence Forces (IRG)* and the *Commission on the Defence Forces Report (CoDF)*, together with measures to address recruitment and retention challenges, and the legislative changes needed to modernise our Defence Forces.

In that context, I was very pleased to recently receive Government approval for the Terms of Reference for a Judge-led Tribunal of Inquiry, as recommended by the IRG, which were further scrutinised by way of a Dáil motion last week, and in that context, I wish Ms. Justice Ann Power every success in her important role as Chair of the Tribunal.

Separately, I also want to reference the recent appointment of Mr. Kevin Duffy as the Independent Chair of a new Working Group to develop a complaints process for civilian employees and civil servants who work with the Defence Forces. Mr. Duffy has vast experience and expertise and I want to acknowledge his acceptance of this role which represents another significant step towards implementing the key recommendations of the IRG.

These developments follow on from the establishment of an External Oversight Body for the Defence Forces, chaired by Professor Brian McCraith. This Body is driving the necessary levels of culture change now required throughout the Defence Forces and will enhance and improve transparency and accountability levels.

This remains an essential part of the transformation of the workplace to support current serving members. To support the body in its work, a dedicated Secretariat has been established and legislation is also being developed to put this Body on a statutory footing as soon as possible.

It goes without saying that progressing such an ambitious programme of strategic transformation and cultural change, while also facilitating ongoing investment in defence capabilities, would require substantial investment in 2024.

In that regard, and building on CODF commitments to increase Defence funding to €1.5 Billion (at 2022 prices) by 2028, through the annual Estimates process, I welcome the total allocation of €1.25 Billion provided for the Defence Vote Group for 2024.

This significant allocation, comprising of €933 million for Vote 36 - Defence and €317 million for Vote 35 - Army Pensions is the largest ever provided to Defence, and represents an overall increase of €40 million on 2023. It includes a capital allocation of €176 million, an allocation which ensures that the capital budget for Defence is maintained at its highest ever level.

This level of capital funding, builds on capital investment progress evident over recent years, and will be used for the ongoing replacement and upgrade of essential military equipment, necessary building and maintenance works and ICT projects, as part of a sustained programme of equipment replacement and infrastructural development.

This will include, inter alia, Primary Radar, Software Defined Radio and Force Protection Programmes along with a wide range of Defence Forces Built Infrastructure projects encompassing Army, Air Corps and Naval Service installations throughout the country.

The overall 2024 Defence (Vote 36) pay allocation of €550 million provides for the pay and allowances of Permanent Defence Force personnel, civilian employees (technicians, trades, etc.) and departmental civil servants. It also provides for paid training for members of the Reserve Defence Force. This includes funding towards the cost of pay increases arising from national pay agreements in 2024.

Ongoing staffing difficulties in the Defence Forces are acknowledged and, in that context, there are a vast number of recruitment and retention measures currently underway to address these issues, including, but not limited to, commissioning from the ranks, the re-entry of former PDF personnel with specific skills, an Air Corps Service Commitment Scheme, the Naval Service Tax Credit and extending service limits for Privates, Corporals and Sergeants. In addition, and with effect from 01 January 2024, the Patrol Duty Allowance (PDA) paid to Naval Service personnel will now be doubled after ten days at sea.

I can confirm that the 2024 PDF pay allocation provides for a prevailing PDF strength of 7,700 plus anticipated additional personnel of 400.

As outlined in the Strategic Framework, a key priority for me in 2024 is to support and progress the recruitment and retention of personnel to our Defence Forces. I recognise the huge challenges attached to delivering on this objective but I want to reassure Members that every effort is being made to increase the strength of our Defence Forces.

The high turnover and challenge with recruitment is being experienced worldwide. As referenced already, this government has introduced many changes to make the Defence Forces an attractive option as a career choice and will continue to work with the Defence Forces to enhance recruitment and retention and return PDF strength figures to the levels necessary to match the levels of ambition outlined in the Commission Report.

The current expenditure non-pay allocation has increased significantly by €32 million to €207 million and provides mainly for essential and ongoing Defence Forces standing and operational costs including utilities, fuel, catering, maintenance, information technology and training.

The role of the Defence Forces is diverse, challenging and multi-faceted and I will briefly reference some of the key outputs I expect to be delivered from the Defence Vote throughout 2024.

The 2024 allocation will allow Defence Forces personnel to meet Government commitments on our overseas peace support missions and proudly represent Ireland abroad often in volatile situations throughout the world.

As of the 11<sup>th</sup> of January, Ireland was contributing 530 personnel to various overseas missions in locations throughout the world. Ireland also contributes observers and staff to a range of international organisations and National Representations.

This level of overseas deployment reflects Ireland's ongoing commitment to international peace and security and I want to thank our Defence Forces for their bravery, professionalism and commitment to their varying overseas roles in the face of escalating worldwide tensions, particularly in the Middle East.

At this time, I think it only right that we take a moment to reflect on the late Private Seán Rooney who was tragically killed while serving in Lebanon in December 2022, along with Trooper Shane Kearney who was seriously injured in the same incident, but is thankfully now recovering. A number of inquiries are ongoing in an attempt to establish the facts surrounding this tragedy and I remain committed to ensuring that those responsible are held accountable and justice is delivered in respect of this heinous crime.

At home, the funding provision will facilitate the continued provision of a military operational response to both the civil power and civil authorities, as required. This is a broad, multi-faceted role which is of vital importance to national security. Examples of the broad range and type of duties undertaken include explosive ordnance disposal duties, air ambulance duties, naval boardings and prisoner escorts.

On behalf of the Government, I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the voluntary effort made by members of the Reserve Defence Force and to thank them for their ongoing dedication and enthusiasm and to assure Members that the ongoing regeneration and revitalisation of the Reserve Defence Force is well underway.

Throughout my statement, I have made strategic references to CODF and IRG funding, however, I would also like to draw Members attention to some specific areas of funding which provide for key recommendations arising from the CODF and the IRG in 2024, such as:

- An increased Civilian Support allocation to facilitate further progression of civilian recruitment and to also allow for an increased spend on the essential engagement of external contractors and consultants;

- An increased Defence Forces Medical Healthcare allocation to cover the full year costs of extended healthcare to all Defence Forces personnel;
- A specific provision to meet the 2024 costs of the Tribunal of Inquiry arising from the IRG Report, with scope for further related increases within future Estimate processes;
- A significant increase in the advertising allocation to support an enhanced Defence Forces recruitment effort throughout 2024;

In addition, €6 million will be provided for essential training, equipment and running costs for Civil Defence, including funding for new uniforms for members of Civil Defence in 2024. Civil Defence volunteers throughout the country continue to provide support to both the front-line services and local communities in responding to emergencies and I thank them most sincerely for their invaluable contribution.

The 2024 Army Pensions (Vote 35) allocation of €317 million, which is demand-led and non-discretionary, will provide funding for up to 13,475 Army Pensioners and certain dependants.

Army Pension numbers are rising steadily and the increased allocation provided in 2024 will address both the cost of existing and new pensions, as well as passing on the benefits from any pay increases received by serving personnel.

To conclude, in a period of unparalleled change, innovation and reform for Defence, I am satisfied that the 2024 Defence allocation of €1.25 billion will build on the progress already made and will enable further ongoing investment to all aspects of the Defence Forces - encompassing its personnel, capabilities, infrastructure and culture.

It will also allow the PDF to meet all tasks assigned by Government, both at home and overseas and will provide the momentum necessary to advance the transformation agenda of the Defence Forces concurrent with the timeframes outlined in the Strategic Framework.

As facilitated under robust corporate governance structures underpinning the Strategic Framework, I look forward to receiving quarterly updates from the Secretary-General of my Department and the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces on the ongoing delivery of related actions, both immediate and into the future, encompassing both Defence policy and operational matters.

I now commend both the Defence and Army Pensions Estimates to the Committee and look forward to some positive engagement with Members on the many important issues currently impacting both the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces.