

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS COSAINT

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

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*Dé Máirt, 5 Deireadh Fómhair 2021*

*Tuesday, 5 October 2021*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3 p.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Cathal Berry,	Catherine Ardagh,
John Brady,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Sorca Clarke,	Joe O'Reilly,
Barry Cowen,	Niall Ó Donnghaile,
David Stanton.	Diarmuid Wilson.

Teachta / Deputy Charles Flanagan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Reserve Defence Force: Discussion**

**Chairman:** The slight delay in starting was due to a division in the Dáil. I am pleased we are meeting Mr. Eugene Gargan, president, Ms Jo McCarthy, vice president, and Mr. Neil Richardson, general secretary, of the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association, RD-FRA. They are very welcome and we look forward to hearing from them on the issues facing the Reserve Defence Force and its members. The format of the meeting, and the president of the association has appeared before the committee previously, is that we will hear the opening statements first. I am very grateful they have been forwarded to the committee. Following the opening statements there will be questions and answers with members of the committee. I ask members to be concise with their questions to allow all members, some of whom are present and others whom I welcome remotely, to participate. We trust all of us will have an opportunity to ask questions and hear from the witnesses.

I remind the witnesses of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of that person or entity. If statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, the witnesses will be directed to discontinue their remarks and it is imperative that any such direction be complied with. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against any person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. Members are only allowed to participate in the meeting if they are physically located in this room or in offices on the Leinster House complex.

I am pleased to call Mr. Richardson, general secretary of the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association, to make his opening statement.

**Mr. Neil Richardson:** In the future, the present moment will be recalled as a critical time in the history of the Reserve Defence Force. It will be remembered as a time when things could have gone one of two ways. The force is at the lowest point in its history, with an official strength figure of only 1,513 effective personnel or 37% of what the force should have, an annual net loss in members since 2015, significant underutilisation, and only a trickle of resources being sent its way to support reserve activities, an issue that is most keenly felt in terms of recruitment. At the same time, there are developments in train that suggest a possible brighter future for the force. The passage of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 granted reservists employment protection in the event of an emergency call-up, meaning should reservists be temporarily activated for full-time service, their jobs would be legally protected while they were away in uniform. The Reserve Defence Force also forms one of the key terms of reference of the Commission on the Defence Forces, while the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2020, which aims to provide reservists with a legal underpinning to engage in domestic and overseas operational service, was recently passed by the Dáil before progressing to the Seanad.

In the coming months, therefore, one of two things will happen. The Reserve Defence Force will either wither away to nothing and finally cease to exist or it will be given a meaningful, modern purpose and become a fully integrated, utilised and utilisable element of the Defence Forces, thereby becoming a rejuvenated, vibrant force again. Members of the Reserve stood shoulder to shoulder with members of the Permanent Defence Force during the 1940s Emergency period and later along the Border during the Troubles. For decades the force provided the

Defence Forces with a local footprint throughout the State, acted as a feeder for the Permanent Defence Force, and stood ready to boost Permanent Defence Force numbers in times of need.

Ultimately, the future of the Reserve will be decided by key civil and military stakeholders. This includes the members of the committee. Why is it a good idea to utilise the Reserve in such a central way and how could this be achieved? The State's national and international defence commitments will only increase in the years ahead. This will be associated with the changing jurisdictional, legal, political and security landscape arising from Brexit, along with our evolving collective responsibilities in the EU and the commitment Ireland retains to supporting international security and humanitarian missions. Such duties and priorities reflect not only the State's values and ethics but also our responsibilities towards financial, economic and social protection, investment and growth.

The actions of adversaries towards the State and its interests require that the military attends to the ongoing development and modernisation of new military capabilities and strategies, which means addressing myriad factors across air, land, sea, cyber and space. Many of the defence and security challenges and priorities for Ireland will necessitate a shift in military culture in the State and throughout State bodies. While priority should remain on urgently addressing and enhancing the deficits within the Permanent Defence Force, there is significant scope to maximise the utilisation of the Reserve. The Permanent Defence Force's establishment is 9,500 personnel but, as of June 2021, the force's strength is only 8,570, with 500 of these being new personnel in training. This has resulted in skills shortages in several key areas. As of February 2021, 50% of officer appointments in the medical and marine engineering branches are vacant while 33% of engineering, 44% of communications and information services and 28% of ordnance officer appointments are also unfilled. The problem is not limited to officer-specific appointments. It was recently reported that the Naval Service is experiencing a 33% deficiency in chefs along with other shortages in non-officer roles such as engine room artificers and medics. Similarly, the Army nursing service currently stands at only 3% to 4% of establishment.

Due to the current low strength figure, the Permanent Defence Force is now experiencing difficulties in filling overseas missions without resorting to the mandatory detailing of personnel. I stress that reservists do not want to take one cent or one career-progressing opportunity away from any member of the Permanent Defence Force but if our regular counterparts need supporting we should be capable of providing that support. There is also a low carrying cost for the contingent capability provided by reservists. We are not in receipt of weekly salaries and are only paid when we engage in relevant military activities. As a result, a concerted effort should begin to grow and develop the Reserve, with associated improvements to the supports provided for reservists. This process should focus not only on addressing critical shortages in key specialist areas in the Defence Force as a whole but also on returning the Reserve to a strength level where it can meaningfully surge in support of the Permanent Defence Force in response to any contingent event.

Put simply, if the State is to prepare for future defence commitments then investment in the Reserve, along with increased training and utilisation, is the best way to achieve this in a cost-effective manner. How could this greater utilisation be achieved? The legislative developments currently in train and the ongoing work of the commission on the Defence Forces are a promising start. However, the devil will be in the implementation detail. Not one of the Reserve Defence Force projects arising from the 2015 White Paper on Defence has been initiated to date so there are understandable fears within the Reserve community that any Reserve-specific recommendations arising from the work of the Commission on the Defence Forces, even those

accepted for implementation, will never be acted upon or will be scheduled for initiation long after the Reserve has dropped below a strength level where it simply cannot claw its way back from the brink. Therefore, the first answer to the question on how greater Reserve utilisation could be achieved is to conduct rigorous oversight of the accepted recommendations arising from the work of the commission on the Defence Forces to ensure they are actually implemented, and implemented promptly.

The Reserve needs to be given meaningful purpose across the full range of operational activities, thereby placing it centre stage alongside the Permanent Defence Force. This will necessitate investment and enhanced training and service opportunities for reservists to get the force to a point where it can deliver on such a role. The Reserve also knows that this means increased expectations and outputs will be placed on members. If the State provides greater financial inputs, we know we have to provide more service outputs in return. This will not be an issue for reservists as the culture of the Reserve has always been one of service, stepping up when needed and giving something back.

To secure the availability of future reservists as and when needed additional legislative changes will be required. Reservists are currently considered as volunteers, a status which means that we cannot be compelled, except during an emergency call up, to report into barracks for anything. Therefore, every time members of the Reserve report for training or any other military activity they are technically doing so of their own free will, and each time it all comes down to the personal availability of each individual reservist on that particular day, which will almost always be dictated by whether or not they can get the time off work. Therefore, to provide Permanent Defence Force commanders with the assurances they need that Reserve members will be able to report in without issue if called upon, the Reserve needs to be redefined from volunteers to part-time workers, and a form, or forms, of employment protection legislation needs to be enacted to secure reservists' employment in their absence should they be called up for temporary military service. Coupled with employment protection legislation, there will also be a need to introduce corresponding employer supports designed to help offset the burden placed on employers during their reservist employee's temporary absence. Such schemes have existed for many years in other states and there are multiple successful examples to study and learn from. Such significant changes could not be successfully implemented without the proper emphasis being placed on the management of cultural change within the wider Defence Forces. This is a key area for change managers to address if the Reserve is to be meaningfully utilised in future.

The future Reserve needs to expand, not contract, its footprint across all counties and then be resourced properly to recruit up to full strength. A geographically dispersed Reserve would allow the Defence Forces to maintain a footprint nationwide, which aside from allowing the Defence Forces to have active personnel available throughout the country would make them more visible in general, thereby allowing the Reserve to return to being a meaningful feeder for Permanent Defence Force recruitment. Ultimately, given our current precarious status, reservists nationwide are pinning all their hopes on what will follow the publication of the commission on the Defence Forces' final report. Our current status has also made the Reserve a fertile ground for change. Members are willing to adopt the positive changes that will, hopefully, come our way and are enthusiastic about engaging in the change management process.

The view is that anything would be better than maintaining the *status quo*. However, tangentially, it is worth noting that in recent months many of the key Reserve issues that need addressing now, and not at some undefined point in future following the conclusion of the com-

mission's work, have been consistently deferred to after the commission's final report has been published. The commission's ongoing work has become too tempting an excuse to stall fixing a Reserve issue now, by essentially saying we do not know what the commission will come back with so we have decided not to take any action at this time.

In the area of recruitment, current inaction is threatening the Reserve's existence to survive until the commission publishes its final report. While it is accepted that the few applicants still live from the 2019 and 2020 recruitment competitions will now finally be called for induction testing in the coming weeks, this represents only a tiny percentage of what could be achieved if a new properly resourced recruitment competition seeking new applicants was launched nationwide.

While we have outlined the four key enablers for the future Reserve, to stay alive long enough to benefit from the commission's report the current Reserve needs new recruits. There are many other benefits to creating an operational future Reserve. In March 2020, it was reported that 6.9% of the Permanent Defence Force were female, with females comprising 4.2% of overseas missions. As of January 2021, the effective strength of the Reserve is 13.3% female, almost double that of the Permanent Defence Force. The current Army Reserve potential officers course, which is in the process of training the next generation of Army Reserve managers, is 24% female. The part-time nature of Reserve service tends to make it more attractive to females because, by definition, the Reserve has inherently flexible working practices. Given that retention of working mothers is linked to family-friendly organisational cultures, and that, as of March 2020, it was reported that 50% of serving Permanent Defence Force female personnel are mothers, the creation of temporary part-time Permanent Defence Force appointments specifically in support of the Reserve may be beneficial for Permanent Defence Force female personnel by allowing them to avail of a short working week for the duration of their time in such an appointment. Furthermore, Permanent Defence Force personnel seeking a career break could be permitted to take up appointments temporarily on the strength of the Reserve, in essence becoming reservists themselves, for the duration of their career break before returning to the Permanent Defence Force afterwards with no break in military service. Overall, such measures may promote retention of personnel within the Permanent Defence Force.

Anecdotally, a significant proportion of Reserve members have heritage links to other countries, often places where the military has greater visibility or where military service, either of a voluntary or compulsory nature, is more widespread among the population than in Ireland. Often such members have strong traditions of military service in their families and while preferring to work or study full-time in a civilian capacity, they see service in the Reserve as a part-time way of engaging with this aspect of their heritage. This means the Reserve tends to be more culturally diverse than the Permanent Defence Forces.

The Reserve's annual budgetary allocation, which has remained unchanged since 2014, is €2.15 million per annum, or 0.26% of the €810 million allocated to Vote 36 for the 2021 defence budget. That is not 2.6% but 0.26%. All of this has come to pass while the Vote 36 budgetary allocation has increased by approximately 18% during the same seven-year period. We are stating these figures to show what the Reserve has managed to survive on. It is subsisting but it has nonetheless survived for the past decade. Even still, it has managed to deliver a level of professional training to members as well as supporting the Permanent Defence Forces inside and outside of barracks, albeit in an unfortunately limited fashion, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic and in support of the HSE during the recent cyberattack. We did all this on the budgetary equivalent of peanuts.

A modest investment in the Reserve, along with the operational utilisation of members, the introduction of a form or forms of employment protection and employer supports, a geographical expansion of the force and the proper resourcing of recruitment, along with rigorous oversight of the whole process will create a well-trained, utilisable and cost effective force that can support the Permanent Defence Forces as and when needed. It can do so in the areas of both specialist skills and in a surge capacity in cases of contingent events. This is a crossroads moment and a once in a generation opportunity for the Reserve to finally become an integral element of the Irish defence infrastructure. We sincerely hope this will become a reality in the near future.

**Chairman:** That is a stark assessment of the state of the Reserve Defence Forces. We have heard from some of Mr. Richardson's colleagues in the Permanent Defence Forces in the course of our work and we had an engagement with the chairman of the commission on the future of the Defence Forces. Like Mr. Richardson, we look forward to that report, which we would expect by the end of this year. I acknowledge what Mr. Richardson said about the implementation and we would see ourselves as having a role in that, which is why we eagerly await its publication.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I thank our guests. Sadly Mr. Richardson hit the nail on the head when he used the word "subsisting". The level of funding that is being provided to the Reserve Defence Forces does not provide any meaningful hope for its future. I want to focus on a few specific questions and I am conscious that the Chair said to be mindful of our time.

Mr. Richardson spoke about employment protection and employer supports and he mentioned geographical expansion. How important does he consider regional development of the Reserve to be? When he speaks of potential overseas operational service for the Reserve, in what areas does he see that service taking place?

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I welcome Mr. Richardson to the meeting. I have always felt that the members of the Reserve Defence Forces were motivated by a great patriotism and sense of volunteerism in that it was not just a career for them but a way for them to give to society on top of their normal jobs and lives. That is an admirable quality and something that merits recognition. It is the kind of resource and motivation we should not lose.

The Reserve used to have a strong link with its communities when I was a youngster but I know the closure of local barracks has damaged that. I was wondering about one solution in a Cavan context but it may apply in other counties and I hope it does. We have a strong Civil Defence voluntary association in Cavan. I am sure that is the case in most counties but they are active in Cavan and they were involved a lot during Covid with meals on wheels, visiting older people and attending the few events that took place to make sure everything was all right. Would integration with the Civil Defence assist the Reserve in its work? Would Mr. Richardson see that as a plus or would he see potential there?

I agree that members of the Reserve should be treated as part-time workers and that its budget should increase. It is an advantage that there is now a facility for members of the force to leave work when called. It would be helpful for the committee to know what kind of funding the Reserve requires and would get in an ideal world? It would be important for us to know that. I favour the status of part-time workers for members of the Reserve but I see a risk in it. Could it reduce the volunteerism and be inappropriate to some people or would it be desirable to balance the two? How would Mr. Richardson see that working out?

Those are my questions but I want to welcome Mr. Richardson. This is a neglected area and

the members of the Reserve are great people. I have known people in my community who have served down the years and it is a great act of service and patriotism.

**Deputy John Brady:** I welcome our guests and thank them for their opening statement, particularly Mr. Richardson who delivered it. It is an area of work that the committee is only starting to focus. I, therefore, welcome this engagement, which it is timely given all the difficulties facing the Reserve Defence Forces. It is alarming to look at and listen to some of the language that is being used to describe where we are such as the reference to being at a crossroads with what will happen in the next couple of months. The Reserve could wither away to nothing and cease to exist and if that was to happen it would be a sad day for our Defence Forces and the excellent service that has been delivered over many years.

I want to ask a number of specific questions. A lot of focus is being put on the commission on the future of the Defence Forces and the work it is undertaking, which is a long time coming and which is welcome. We are being told we will get a copy of that report by the end of the year or early next year. What engagement has taken place with the commission other than the submission the Reserve Defence Forces Representative Association has made to it? I also want to ask about the recruitment campaigns, specifically the 2019 campaign when there were two distinct recruitment campaigns for both the Army Reserve and the Naval Reserve, respectively. More than 2,600 applicants came forward at that stage. Very few of them were progressed from the application stage and brought into the force. I listened to the general secretary when he said that some of those members are still on the books and the hope is to bring them forward. The concern, as stated previously, is around the delays in bringing those applicants forward and the two-year timeframe involved. How many of those people have lost interest? For how many of them has life moved on? In real terms, can we explicitly say how many of those 2,600 who have not been taken into the force still have an interest?

I share some of the concerns, particularly those around the White Paper. It is very alarming that none of the projects identified in the White Paper has been enacted. That is a cause of concern. I am hopeful for the commission and its work. The proof will be in the delivery of it and there is a key role for this committee and others in ensuring the best report possible comes from the commission and that its recommendations are fully implemented.

I have a number of other questions. In his opening statement, Mr. Richardson said, “The future Reserve needs to expand, not contract, its footprint across all counties of the State and then be resourced properly to recruit up to full strength.” I remember proudly that the 21st Infantry Battalion had three locations in Wicklow, one in Arklow, another in Wicklow town and a third in Rockbrae House in Bray. The battalion also had a location in Dún Laoghaire. With the restructuring of the organisation, the 21st Infantry Battalion was amalgamated with the 20th Infantry Battalion to create the 62nd Infantry Battalion. The impact is that the Reserve Defence Force does not have a footprint in Wicklow. It is not as visible as it was. What do our guests think about that impact? Reference was made to that issue in their opening statement.

There are 1,513 members of the Reserve Defence Force. Do our guests have a breakdown of those members? I do not expect them to have a breakdown here but perhaps they could furnish the committee with a breakdown, county by county, as to where those numbers come from. Not having a footprint on the ground in each of the counties is having a negative impact.

I welcome the advancement of the Defence (Amendment) Bill, which is working its way through the Seanad. The Minister has committed to following that up, which is critical. Mr. Richardson, in his opening statement, made reference to the necessity for employment protec-

tion legislation. I agree that is critical and needs to follow on quickly from the passing of the Defence (Amendment) Bill. In his opening statement, Mr. Richardson specifically mentioned that a number of countries have put protections and legislation in place, and there is best practice out there. Perhaps he could point us towards a country in which legislation has been enacted and where it works.

My final question relates to funding. The situation is stark and concerning. The budget for the Reserve Defence Force has remained static since 2014 at €2.15 million per annum. That does not speak of a Government that takes pride, or sees value, in its Reserve, or sees the potential to expand its remit. What engagement has taken place with the Department and the Minister? Can our guests give us an ideal figure that they think should be acceptable in terms of the expansion of the Reserve? What would be an ideal figure to operate with?

**Chairman:** I will now revert to our guests to deal with the questions raised by Deputy Clarke, Senator O'Reilly and Deputy Brady. I will resume with Deputy Stanton thereafter, followed by Senator Ó Donnghaile.

**Mr. Eugene Gargan:** I thank the members of the committee for their excellent questions. I will ask our general secretary, Mr. Richardson, to respond to Deputy Clarke's first question. Perhaps I will come in on the overseas part of the question.

**Mr. Neil Richardson:** I will answer Deputy Clarke's first question along with Deputy Brady's third. They are quite thematically similar. I will answer the question of how important is the geographical expansion. I will take a geographical area with which I am familiar, namely, the Longford-Roscommon area. Prior to 2012, there was a Reserve training centre in Roscommon town and Connolly Barracks was in Longford. That would have allowed reservists or people who were interested in joining the Reserve in those two counties to have a central point where they could come to be trained and to engage with the organisation. They were subsequently closed. County Longford, as Deputy Brady said was true of County Wicklow, no longer has a Reserve training centre at all. We could go through other counties, including Laois and Offaly, where there simply is not a Reserve presence anymore.

How important is that contraction of the Reserve? It disincentivises interested parties in those regions from joining the Reserve. If people in the Longford-Roscommon area have an interest in joining the Reserve, their closest centre might be in Mullingar, Athlone town or Boyle in north County Roscommon. That might be quite a distance to travel for a young individual who might find it hard to get there. I am not even talking about younger individuals who might not have their own form of transport but serving reservists who are now being told there is an ancillary travel cost associated with attending for training. That training is often voluntary or free. A person is being told that instead of a journey of a couple of miles, perhaps walking distance to a training centre or local barracks, he or she now has to put a certain amount of fuel into the car, at their personal cost, to attend a training event for which they are not paid. Service in the Reserve now comes at a net cost. Quite a lot of reservists over recent years have simply weighed up whether it is economically feasible for them to remain serving and decided it is not. That is where some of the loss of members has come from.

Providing a centre, at least one per county, gives local reservists or local interested applicants an opportunity to serve locally. It facilitates that level of engagement. If we shut down Reserve training centres, so they are few and far between throughout the State, we can look into that situation and see exactly why reservists stop turning up. Attendance comes at a net cost to reservists.

**Mr. Eugene Gargan:** Deputy Clarke also asked about overseas service for reservists and our view as to how that might be accomplished or what its purpose might be. I will start by stating that in the first instance, we had proposed overseas service. The intention was not to displace any of our comrades in the Permanent Defence Force, PDF, from their service because we understand overseas service is part of the requirements of their service. We have often noted commentary from members of the PDF who return from overseas service having served with reservists from other European nations. They often remark on how seamlessly it works and the benefits of having somebody with an exposure to the military way of life and a complementary civilian outlook.

We would see that, initially at least, there are specialist roles which need to be filled. That is a short-term solution to other, broader problems with the Defence Forces overall. There are opportunities to utilise specialists in the cybersecurity and medical areas. There are also, presumably, opportunities in logistics when there are shortcomings or challenges around providing the manpower from the Permanent Defence Forces. Those opportunities also come with challenges. For a reservist to serve overseas and make that commitment, not only is it costly in terms of their family commitments but there are also risks to their jobs. It is not just a matter of holding an appointment open for somebody when he or she leaves his or her civilian job, but there are also the opportunities on which he or she might miss out.

We can come to the shape of the legislation and how it ought to be thought of as we try to look after the interests of reserves. We are only talking about a small number of people. I suggest that, initially, there could be specialist roles. There is, however, another aspect to this. When we made the original proposal for overseas service for reservists, my thoughts on that were that if we could get every part of the mechanism for training reservists working to produce people to the standard required to serve overseas along with the PDF, whose members have a whole military career behind them, then that in itself would mean that all the processes, procedures and training would have had to have gone right for at least some of our number. To be practical about that, someone going overseas, even for a short-term engagement, would have to have all their equipment, be trained, be to a medical standard and a fitness standard and have all the technical courses complete. For all that to happen, however, the whole pyramid of support services has to be in place and work seamlessly, and that is important to consider. That was the objective. It was not necessarily so much about putting Reserve boots on the ground overseas. It was about what that would represent. It would represent the fact that the mechanism from recruitment all the way through for all their training would be working well. That is our view on the role overseas.

I will move on to Senator O'Reilly. I take his point about the Civil Defence in Cavan. I am a Cavan man and know many former colleagues who have moved into the Civil Defence and they do an excellent job, but there is a difference between the Reserve Defence Force and the Civil Defence. We are trained in military matters and in the use of lethal force. We are bound by military law. The Civil Defence does not have those sorts of constraints and its service is very different. I would find it challenging to see how both could be integrated. There are some complementary overlaps on which we could work together more closely, perhaps, such as exercises or something of that nature, but trying to join the two of them up would, I think, be a challenge.

In response to the question about part-time worker status and the legislation, again, there are challenges with legislation on employment protection. I think that in the area of employment equality some work has already been done. The protection of ordinary workers was a long time

coming over the years. I am minded that I am probably of an age that I can recall when a long time ago there was a significant debate on the protection of employment for women on maternity leave. That was considered by some to be an insurmountable challenge and one which would be very costly to private industry and the State, yet it was rightly sorted out to whatever extent one might think, and maybe it could be enhanced, but these are challenges which can be fixed.

As for amendments to existing legislation, we would be cautious in making recommendations. We do not want to suggest seismic changes to legislation because these matters should be approached cautiously. I would favour making small changes, at least initially, rather than something too big.

It should be borne in mind there has to be proper engagement with other stakeholders as well. It is not just us but it is also the Department of Defence, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and employers' representatives. There a lot of voices to be heard as to how this will work. Of course, we would like to be at the centre of that to guide how it would go through.

Mr. Richardson made a point in his opening address about our status. The fact that we are classed as volunteers has long been a concern for us. There are two types of volunteers. There is the type in the popular imagination, that is, people who do things for nothing. My concern about that is that if you do something for nothing, it is seen as being worthless, and we are not worthless. We actually provide an enormous pool of resources to the State freely and of our own time. Some of what we do is paid for, but we need to recognise that. In doing so, I think we will go part of the way to addressing issues with recruitment and retention.

Senator O'Reilly asked about funding. The exercise of developing a budget appropriate to what it is the Reserve does would have to encompass the outputs the committee would seek to have us deliver. That is important as well. I would not suggest a figure off the top of my head. I am concerned about the fact that our budget, as Mr. Richardson mentioned, represents, I think, 0.26% of the overall Vote. I think someone remarked that more is spent on cleaning of military installations than on the Reserve. By any measure, that order of magnitude is wrong, we think. However, it brings into consideration what our strategic purpose should be. I think there is an awful lot of potential that has not been recognised in recent years. The appropriate way to operate would be to realise what the potential is, set meaningful objectives and then construct a budget accordingly.

The final question Senator O'Reilly asked was about part-time work and the ethos of volunteerism. I will pass over to our vice president, Ms McCarthy, to take that question.

**Ms Jo McCarthy:** The answer to Senator O'Reilly's question is "No". I do not think it would damage any volunteer dimension at all. None of us is in this organisation to make money, I can assure the Senator. With 20 years' service and the amount of mileage and the amount of equipment you buy, it does not equate, so absolutely not.

As for the reason people are in the Reserve, they get to experience something that many other people do not. They have a sense of camaraderie that you do not get in any other industry. They gain experience of the Defence Forces. As Mr. Gargan said, we operate under military law. We take part in some robust training. That is an incredible experience as well. Also, reservists see their time in the Reserve as an investment in their personal careers. They are trained up in presentation skills, leadership and communication. Take a young person coming in at 18 and going into college and, hopefully, getting a job after two or three years of college. They

are already junior managers. They are already trained. They can already work with initiative. Those are my thoughts on that.

**Mr. Eugene Gargan:** Moving on to Deputy Brady's questions, he asked about engagement with the commission. I am very happy to say we made a significant presentation to the Commission on the Defence Forces and it went very well. The international component of the commission, that is, those who are familiar with reservists in their own countries, very much took to heart what we had to propose. Part of that proposal was a restructuring of the Defence Forces in a way which would follow the population of the country, particularly the cohort from which we seek to recruit. We had the engagement formally. Also, the commission made a number of visits to military installations up until quite recently. I think it finished the final such visit only recently. We were quite happy that the commission met many reservists as well, not just us, so there was a very good and very meaningful engagement with the commission. I am very happy to mention that.

I will ask Mr. Richardson to talk about recruitment campaigns. Before I do, as for the point about stark figures, I refer to what might be called a conversion rate of those expressing an interest in joining the Army Reserve. I am an Army reservist. In my unit, and through the good offices of senior non-commissioned officers, NCOs, and the officers who look after recruitment in my unit, over recent years, when you amalgamate the figures, the conversion rate is 2.4%. In other words, of all the local people in my area who wish to join the Reserve, that is the percentage that actually gets through. Were it 24%, I would say to the committee that there was a failure in this centralised process for recruitment, but 2.4% is beyond belief. There is a serious problem with the centralised process there. This has to be one of the key messages. We will come back to it before I finish. Recruitment is essential. We need urgently to fix recruitment before we move on. The reason we urgently need to fix recruitment for the Army Reserve and the Naval Service Reserve is that we simply will not survive until such time as the recommendations, which we expect to be made by the commission, are executed. As Mr. Richardson said, we are on a trajectory that is not great. The figure of 1,500, which one of the members referred to and is in the public domain, is an ageing figure and is only going in one direction. It is reducing and shrinking day by day, so urgent action is needed. Once the framework of the Reserve is gone, it will be practically impossible to construct something to replace it. An enormous opportunity will be lost at great cost to the State. I had to mention that at this point. I will hand over to Mr. Richardson on recruitment campaigns.

**Mr. Neil Richardson:** I will address Deputy Brady's question. He has shown an understanding of this issue. It has been one for many years and "timelines" is the key word. On average, it takes a year to 18 months for an applicant to join the Reserve, from the day he or she applies online to the day they can be sworn in or attested, which is the official word. It can take a year to 18 months and the various stages they have to go through, be it interviews, fitness tests, medical exams or whatever it might be, can often be arranged months apart to the point that, as the Deputy quite rightly said, when people are recontacted when it is time for the next part of the recruitment process, they have simply lost interest because many months have passed since the Defence Forces last communicated with them. The Deputy specifically mentioned 2019. Of the several thousand applicants we had that year, 144 people were successfully attested at the end of the year.

If I go back a few more years, the figures are quite stark. There were 4,870 applicants in 2014. The question is often thrown at us whether an interest in joining the Reserve is still there among the public in the State. Some 5,000 applicants for that competition, out of which we

attested 157, would suggest “yes”. I do not believe for a moment that all these people failed their interviews, medical exams or fitness tests. It is likely that several months after the last stage at which they were contacted they had grown uninterested. For any organisation to take 18 months for applicants to get in the door, it is a miracle we still have 144 people left at the end of the process. It attests to their desire to join.

Two years ago, when we last appeared before this committee, we talked about our strength figure at the time. We are now 33% down on that strength figure. Even with the trickle of attestations we have had over the past number of years, we are on a net loss, year-on-year. We are now one third smaller than we were two years ago when we last appeared before this committee. At present, that is the main problem. We even have instances involving medical resourcing and getting Defence Force medicals for recruits, which is a massive issue in that reservists are, unfortunately, last on the list of priorities in accessing a military doctor. Sometimes the process takes so long that the medical they get is void after a 12-month wait, so another medical is needed. This is not only a waste of resources; it shows how long the process can go on for.

If this continues, and was to keep going for another couple of years, we could be before this committee again in two years’ time saying there are 500 of us left. As Mr. Gargan quite rightly pointed out, a certain number of personnel in certain ranks is needed in order to form a training staff for new recruits. We are getting to the point where cobbling together training staff to train these new people will be difficult. Even if they handed us 1,000 recruits in the morning, we may shortly get to a point where we physically cannot train them. I have, hopefully, addressed that issue.

I would like to, however, segue into answering Senator O’Reilly’s question on funding, paired with Deputy Brady’s question on the budget. As Mr. Gargan said, it is hard to put a figure on it but I will point out to Deputies and Senators the way the €2.15 million is structured. The RDF allocation in Vote 36 is designed to allow a full-strength Reserve of 4,000 personnel, with seven paid days each a year. The idea is if there were 4,000 of us, we would all get seven paid days a year. The problem is that most Reserve training courses are 14 days, 21 days or 28 days. There is a problem straight away in that we will be victims of our own success if we have a full-strength Reserve since we would be asking Reservists to either undertake, possibly, 25% of a paid training course and do the rest voluntarily, which is not feasible, or we simply would not be able to attend the training course because we would not have the paid day allocation to provide. The whole system is structured in such a way that we would be victims of our own success if we had 4,000 people. We simply could not survive on seven paid days each a year. That is something that will have to be addressed.

Concurrently with capital investment, as was mentioned earlier, a geographical expansion is the way to get the Reserve back up to full strength and back into communities, which was a great strength of the old FCA in decades past. However, that would involve the renting or purchasing of suitable training facilities in the county. At the moment, our budget is solely for pay. However, a form of Reserve-specific capital investment would also be needed to facilitate that expansion. It could not all be about man days, or paid days as they are referred to.

**Mr. Eugene Gargan:** When it comes to the challenges posed by reducing the size of the Reserve, the effect of the decline in numbers gets to a point where we step off a cliff. A critical mass of suitably qualified personnel is required in order to undertake tasks. For example, if we want to go onto an firing range, we have to have a security party, a working party and those who doing their annual range practices. We cannot do that with a small number of people. We have to have the right number of people.

Similarly, if we are going to train people, we have to have the right number of suitably qualified instructors. On that point, going closer to home and looking at the typical age profile in my unit, a Reservist is now in their early 40s. This causes problems. It is a problem long in the making because recruitment has been so poorly executed over the past number of years it is now starting to manifest in not having junior leaders; it is difficult to identify people to go on potential officer courses because they simply do not have the numbers and it means we are challenged when it comes to training the recruits we get in. If we were able to magically fling the doors open and solve the numbers problem by recruiting, that in itself will be a major challenge for us at this stage because the infrastructure, in terms of personnel and resources available, has been run down to a stage where it is barely in existence. Ramping it back up again will be a challenge.

There was a question on the ideal size of the Reserve. For our submission to the commission, we had a discussion on this, we thought about it long and hard and we decided we would make our pitch based on the 4,000-odd number. We are talking about aiming to get back to where we should be now. That would be a reasonable first step rather than looking at international comparators, which sometimes look at a factor, between the permanent Defence Forces and the Reserve, or a possible order of magnitude, of one-to-one or one-to-two. That would actually be too challenging. That is a long-term goal we might look at, but even to get back to where we should be will take a significant effort. It is not just money. It takes other military resources as well.

Deputy Brady also asked about employment protection. We have probably addressed that. There is a lot to be done and a lot that could be done without any unforeseen consequences. For example, we could establish other grounds for anti-discrimination in the workplace. There are a number of grounds already and something as simple as saying that someone who is a current or former member of the Defence Forces ought not to be discriminated against, could be easily put together and would be an excellent first step.

On the questions about engagement with the Minister, I am quite happy to report that engagement with this Minister is very positive and very good. He certainly sees the value of the Reserve and he also understands the challenges we are facing.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy Stanton who, our guests will be aware, has some direct experience of the Reserve Defence Force.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I am in Leinster House. I again welcome our guests. I met some of them a number of years ago. It is sad to see things have not progressed very much since then. In fact, they have gone the other way. As the Chairman said, I was a member of the RDF, which was called the FCA for 23 years. When I got elected to the Dáil, I got a letter from the President saying my services were no longer required as an officer on the Reserve. You cannot do both, but that is okay. I was probably getting too old for it anyway, because I could not keep up with the young fellas when they were doing route marches and stuff at that stage. I wondered why but age has a bearing. It is a good organisation for young people.

I will pick up on something Ms McCarthy said which I have believed strongly in for quite a bit. It concerns the role the Reserve plays in developing personality, self-confidence, leadership, presentation skills, citizenship and so on. I have mentioned it previously and have direct experience of it. I have seen young boys and girls joining the Reserve quite timid and, with the training and support they got, their CVs were enriched enormously.

On the role the Reserve plays as a recruitment mechanism for the PDF, we found it disturbing that our best soldiers often joined the PDF once they got a feel for military life and liked it. At the moment, the PDF is having a problem with recruitment. When I was in the FCA, in 1991 the establishment was 22,000 people, mainly young people. The strength in December 1991 was 15,293. The number who attended training camp in 1990 was almost 7,500 young people. That was normally two weeks fully paid. That was a lot of money and good pay for youngsters in college or just after doing the leaving certificate. It helped many people make their way into the world. There are other strengths with respect to the Reserve that have to be recognised. It is not just the military side. As has been said here, the main focus is on augmenting the PDF, but there are other values and strengths.

Canada has a cadet programme for teenagers from 12 to 18. They are inducted and do all kinds of training under the auspices of the army, navy and air force in Canada. Listening to the radio on the way up today, I heard a debate about many young people in Ireland having nothing to do and all night to do it. They are hanging around the streets with nowhere to go, which brings me back to the issue of the closure of training places. Senators Wilson and Joe O'Reilly spoke on this as well. People need places to go if they are to train. These were often large halls where people could march and so forth. It was useful from that point of view. The establishment is 4,069. That is what the strength should be, but the actual number is way down at 1,513. Will our guests comment on the Naval Service Reserve? The number there is 125 and the establishment is quite small at, I think, 200. I am interested in that. We are visiting the naval base on Friday and I would like to see that area focused on.

I think it was in 2019 that Mr. Gargan spoke about the expenses that members of the Reserve incur in travelling to training centres, purchasing equipment and so on. I think Ms McCarthy said it as well. Reservists are owed money because there have been changes made to the funding. There used to be a gratuity at the end of every year and it was scrapped. There is the issue of pooling equipment, which is unhygienic.

What issues from the White Paper would the witnesses like to see implemented straight away? They mentioned that none of them has been. Are there priorities the witnesses have? Can they point to best practice in other countries? Can they point to any country in Europe we should emulate? I ask about witnesses' contact with Óglaigh Náisiúnta na hÉireann-Organisation for National Ex-Service Personnel, ONE. I was at the opening of a hostel for ONE in Cobh last Sunday, Brú na Farraige, where five bedrooms were established for members of the PDF who might have fallen on hard times. I am interested to know the connection. I understand former members of the Reserve can become members of the ONE. Do the witnesses encourage or support that or bring it to people's attention? At that event, they constantly referred to me as a veteran. I am not sure if that is a good or bad thing but that was the term they used.

We look forward to the commission's report.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I welcome our guests and thank them for their opening statement. It was a comprehensive, fairly grim but accurate assessment of where we are. Honestly is always a good place to start.

I will raise three questions. The first is in light of the legislation that will probably be signed off by the President in the coming weeks to allow Reserve Defence Forces people deploy overseas. What are the witnesses' thoughts on when the first member of the Reserve will deploy overseas? I seek a ballpark answer. Second, there is an Army Reserve and a Naval Service Reserve but no Air Corps reserve. What are the witnesses' thoughts on establishing one? The

Air Corps is under-strength at the moment. Most modern countries have an air force reserve. Why is Ireland so special that it does not have one? Is it something we should consider? The last question is on the employment protection legislation. I like the way the opening statement coupled potential employment protection legislation with an employer support package. That is a good twinning and a good way to go. I take the point we need to liaise with various stakeholders like IBEC and ISME before something as significant as this is introduced but surely in the public sector we should get our own house in order first. As a first incremental step, what are the witnesses' thoughts on the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform putting out a circular to all Departments that where we have a full-time member of the public service who is also a reservist in the Defence Forces, if that person is deployed overseas or at home in operations, their employment is protected and their job will be available when the period of emergency or of deployment overseas ends?

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I do not want to ask any questions. They have been well covered by everybody. I thank the witnesses for their presentation, their presence and the responses they have given thus far. I acknowledge the submission they have made to the commission and its contents. It is incumbent upon us members of the committee to reflect the witnesses' wishes as best we can when we respond to that with the Minister with a view to the recommendations and how they move forward from there.

To Mr. Richardson, we always found accessibility to Athlone sufficient from our part of County Offaly. Mullingar was there too for another section down south.

Deputy Berry's point is important, regarding the acknowledgement of the issue of foreign service and looking at a way in which the Air Corps could be opened up. The recent package is there for a new promotional mechanism to improve take-up of positions in the Reserve and Permanent Defence Forces. I am conscious of the issues and difficulties in the PDF, including moral issues. I assume as an onlooker that, if there are serious issues in the PDF, they are doubled within the Reserve forces. I hope the issues contained in the submission to the commission are taken as seriously as they should be because that is the starting point from which one would expect many to apply further up the line.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy Brady on behalf of Deputy Ó Donnghaile, who unfortunately had to leave for another meeting.

**Deputy John Brady:** He unfortunately had to leave early to go to Order of Business in the Seanad. He had a specific question he put in the chat. He spoke last week during the debate on the Defence (Amendment) Bill in the Seanad and raised with the Minister, Deputy Coveney, the issue of the Reserve and the Permanent Defence Force. While the Senator is conscious of the funding issues outlined, he believes there is a need to ensure any future recruitment drive for the Reserve or Permanent Defence Force will be carried out across all Thirty-two Counties. Does the general secretary believe that if this approach were taken, it would help to grow recruitment numbers? Major events in the North, such as the agricultural shows and university fairs, in addition to billboards and media advertising, could be used. The advertising is not seen in the North in the same way as in the South, despite the large number of citizens in the North who would be interested in pursuing a role as a member of either the Reserve or Permanent Defence Force. That is a question from Senator Ó Donnghaile.

**Mr. Eugene Gargan:** I thank the members for some excellent questions. It is always a pleasure to get a question from Deputy Stanton. It is good to see him again. His first question was on citizenship and the development of personnel. He referred to our vice president, Ms Jo

McCarthy. I ask her to answer the question, after which I will answer the others.

**Ms Jo McCarthy:** We can use the Reserve as a slipstream into the Permanent Defence Force but ethnic minorities may not know what it is like to lead the life of a member of the Defence Forces. Through the Reserve, they can dip their toe in the water to see what it is like. The Deputy mentioned all the different types of communities. Sexual orientation is a big subject at the moment. It is important that people feel comfortable and believe they can progress.

The Deputy referred to the youth. Troubled youth may have been dealt a bad card deal and deserve another chance. Giving them a chance to join the Reserve gives them a support system and discipline. I talked about camaraderie a while ago. Joining results in excellent benefits for the youth. Being able to participate in outdoor activities is an incredibly strong asset to have. If we could help even some of the troubled youth in every county, it would be fantastic.

**Mr. Eugene Gargan:** I thank Ms McCarthy.

The Deputy asked a question on recruitment to the Permanent Defence Force. The Reserve Defence Force and its predecessors, An Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil and An Slua Muirí, have traditionally been a very effective channel for recruitment into the Permanent Defence Force. It was a very attractive channel from the Permanent Defence Force's perspective because those recruited through it did not enter military life unaccustomed to it. Therefore, the dropout rate was understandably very low. Recruits hit the road running and there was a fairly effective conversion rate. In fact, it was often said that it was a major problem in terms of natural wastage. So many were people leaving the ranks of the Reserve to go into the Permanent Defence Force that it caused a bit of a problem. It was not a bad problem to have, and we were happy to do our best in that regard. As a result of the trend in question, a high number of former members of the Reserve and former direct colleagues are in the Permanent Defence Force.

I was asked about the other strengths and social benefits. I believe the Deputy was talking about the other socio-economic benefits that accrue from military service. Deputy Berry is a fine example of someone who has come through the Defence Forces and who has launched another career, or multiple careers in his case. There is an awful lot to be gained from military service. As Ms McCarthy mentioned, it instils a sense of *esprit de corps*. One adopts the values of the Defence Forces. For a great number of people, it is an expression of their patriotism and service to the State. That can only be welcomed as a good thing. However, back when the much-discredited value-for-money report was put together, there was zero value put on any of these factors. No value was placed on any social benefit to the community whatsoever. It was strictly lined up with military benefit. That is a difficulty. The report did not take an holistic approach, accounting for the benefit of the Reserve to the State as a whole. That was a significant shortcoming. I will not get into the issue of the value-for-money report because we have not prepared for it. That is another chapter in history.

On the Naval Service Reserve numbers, I will hand over to Mr. Richardson.

I was asked about having referred to the expense of serving in the Reserve when I last spoke. The point made was true. I am not an accountant but if we were to keep a tally of what we spend on fuel, tolls, maintenance of our uniforms, buying kit and not getting paid for the majority of what we do, we would certainly note we are out of pocket.

The withdrawal of the gratuity scheme was said to fund additional man days. We were told that we would get back in one pocket what we lost from the other. That simply has not

happened. Many of us feel that we continue to pay a price for our service. We do not do it for money. There are other drivers that keep us connected and serving. As Ms McCarthy mentioned, it is all about being part of a bigger organisation and service to the State.

On the White Paper projects, the White Paper is a bit dated at this stage. I will ask Mr. Richardson to give an update on his thoughts on this matter. We have been waiting for quite a while for something to come of the White Paper projects. The White Paper was launched to a fanfare several years ago but it has not delivered anything for us. That is simply a matter of fact. It is very disappointing that it has not delivered anything. To be blunt about it, we have more significant concerns at this stage. Our very survival as an entity is what we are worried about now. We talked in the foyer outside about whether this is the last time we will get to come in here. Will we be in existence in a couple of years? I cannot overstate this point. I do not mean to be overly negative because there is a positive to be brought to the members' attention also. I will get to that towards the end. We are not that concerned about the White Paper at this stage; we are more concerned about the commission and being able to stay in existence until its recommendations, which we expect to be positive, are executed, and not delayed or stalled in any shape or form.

On best practice and the other questions, I will hand over to Mr. Richardson. Before doing so, I will make a last point, on ONE. ONE is a marvellous organisation. I was present for the launch of its campaign, the Fuchsia appeal. The organisation does tremendous work. It serves several purposes. It does fabulous work looking after our veterans. It was quite keen to redefine the term "veteran" to mean anybody who had served. I would not take it as a reflection on the Deputy's age, particularly coming from someone like me, who marked 35 years of service in the Reserve this week. I am not quite a veteran just yet. I endorse the work of ONE. Many of our former members are in it. We help them whenever we can.

I will now pass over to Mr. Richardson, who will take the other questions.

**Mr. Neil Richardson:** I will address Deputy Stanton's outstanding questions in sequence. On the Naval Service Reserve figures, the establishment of the Naval Service Reserve is currently 200 personnel, of all ranks. It has an effective strength of 121. The strength figure is at about 67% of establishment, whereas the Army Reserve figure is at about 37%. Percentage-wise, the Naval Service Reserve is not faring as badly as the Army Reserve. However, the 2015 White Paper stated the Naval Service Reserve's establishment would be increased by another 100 personnel so it should be at 300. Again, this is one of the White Paper projects that has yet to be initiated. We would argue it is quite a simple one to initiate but, six years later, the Naval Service Reserve's establishment still sits at 200.

On what we can do with the Naval Service Reserve, I say begrudgingly as a proud Army reservist that because we are an island nation, the maritime aspect of the Defence Forces deserves serious input. The Naval Service Reserve could easily be expanded to other coastal locations throughout the State. An obvious example is Galway, because there is a permanently manned barracks in Dún Uí Mhaoilíosa. One would not be seeking to purchase another Reserve training facility as there is one there already. We understand that Galway Port might be developed in future years and it would be nice to have a Naval Service Reserve unit based there. That is just one of many locations around the State where Naval Service Reserve units could be placed. They are a particularly underutilised aspect of the Reserve Defence Force, and it should be 100 personnel larger than it is currently given the level of establishment that has yet to be initiated.

Deputy Stanton asked about White Paper issues for implementation. I can only reiterate

what Mr. Gargan has said. We have moved on so much from the White Paper. The White Paper states that the two reasons for the Reserve to exist is to augment the Permanent Defence Force in times of crisis and to carry out State ceremonial events as and when required. The first one is quite a vague support purpose. It is not even defined in the document as to what a crisis situation might be. We would argue that Covid-19 definitely qualifies as a crisis event, yet for the most part the Reserve was not utilised during the Covid-19 pandemic. If the pandemic does not meet the definition of a crisis then we do not know what does. We have definitely moved on past the White Paper. It can even be seen in the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2020. This Bill is to give us an operational output. This is so far beyond what the White Paper was willing to provide for the Reserve. The White Paper issues are really yesterday's concern at this stage.

With regard to other countries we can use as examples, this goes back to an earlier question by Deputy Brady, the UK is worth looking at with its SaBRE organisation, which is an employer engagement body. It is an intermediary between civil employers and the defence industry. Essentially, it translates army-speak into civilian talk and *vice versa* New Zealand and Australia are also very good examples of where it has worked very well.

I will speak briefly of something that the Australians do that really sells the benefits of defence to employers. It is a Department of Defence programme called "exercise boss lift". Essentially, they take civilian employers and put them through a rudimentary form of military training, or at the very least bring them along to a training facility to show them what their employees are getting up to while they are away, and showing them the benefits of this. It gives them a soft introduction to military life. In many ways it is seen as an advertisement for the wider defence industry. It gives employers an understanding of the value of the training that these reservist employees receive when they are away, and the benefits to the companies when these reservist employees come back.

Obviously, the military does 99% of its work behind a barracks wall and often what exactly the military does or what its benefits are not visible to the civilian body or private industry. Once that metaphorical wall comes down, all of a sudden employers start to see the wealth of qualifications that reservist employees can attain and, from the civilian employers perspective, for free. This experience is something their employees obtain while away on military service and the employers are not putting their hands in their pockets in order to provide this training to their employees. The UK, Australia and New Zealand would be the countries to look at. I will pass back to Mr. Gargan now to address Deputy Berry's questions.

**Mr. Eugene Gargan:** Deputy Berry's questions are excellent, as usual. The first of those three questions was, given the legislation, when would we see overseas service. We touched on this earlier and there is no reason that could not happen almost immediately. There are obviously a couple of prerequisites around the training and the provision of other resources to ensure that we have the right people to go overseas. At this stage, however, it would be limited as to who would be able to go. There will probably be a requirement to have a look at the employment protection. We are back to that again. The employment protection is a broad issue. One approach could be to make small changes to the periphery of the corpus of legislation and see how that could work or one could take a broader approach by saying that we want tie this in with the broader strategic purpose of the Reserve. What is it there to do? Are we there, for example when it comes to service overseas? Are we there to provide back up to the PDF and fill the slots that they cannot fill in particular or specialist roles? Is there a target where we would make up a small percentage of, for example, a contingent serving overseas? I would favour the latter because such a function would pull along all of the other procedures such as training and

standards in order to provide personnel for such a duty.

On the potential for an Air Corps reserve, this was often mentioned when I would meet with colleagues in the Air Corps. They would ask why we were not out there and flying along with them. In our submission to the commission we made a proposal that would provide for an Air Corps reserve, albeit not aloft. Perhaps Mr. Richardson will talk a little bit more about that. Our submission on this is based on a model a bit like the RAF reserve garrison operates. There is certainly potential for that.

On the issue of employment protection. I believe that the Deputy's intention was asking where do we start to protect reservists who are serving in the public and Civil Service. It is a bit like the old saying of charity beginning at home. I believe that the State can set the tone and could actually embark upon making the changes for those who serve the State, through the Civil Service and public service, and to protect them.

There is a circular, if memory serves me it is circular No. 51/1979, which provides for a number of days leave for service in the FCA. That was contingent upon approval by management and so on. It only went so far as looking at training from the FCA point of view. Absolutely we would endorse that idea and it would be a starting place. It would certainly send a signal that the State and the Government is very serious about employment protection for reservists. It would also serve as a test bed for showing how it would actually work. One would get over the issues of the person being absent from their role: how it would be backfilled; how functions are dealt with when the person leaves and returns; and questions relating to the person's insurance, pension entitlement and pay. All of these types of things would have to be sorted out. These are just the details behind it but the principle is a good one.

**Mr. Neil Richardson:** On the Air Corps reserve, in our proposal it is our view that the future Reserve should incorporate PDF service leavers with all of their wealth of experience and qualifications, and what could be defined as the citizen volunteer reservist, which is the person with no previous full-time military service. How would an Air Corps reserve work? More than likely the pilot or the specialist side of things would be predominantly, if not exclusively, taken up with PDF service leavers. Citizen volunteer reservists could perform other ancillary roles in support of that. The Air Corps is a fertile ground for adding a reserve because, as the Deputy has quite rightly said, there has not ever been such a reserve. Certainly, there are areas where a reserve could assist. Part of our submission was a rejigging of the first line reserve. I am aware that the Deputy is familiar with this. PDF service leavers who are retained on a list are referred to as the first line reserve. The Army Reserve and the Naval Service Reserve are actually the second line reserve. The first line reserve is a body of PDF service leavers who are retained and who can be recalled for various reasons. This force was established in the post-Emergency period, which was back in the mid-1940s, ostensibly with no establishment figure and with no real idea as to how it could be properly utilised. These individuals did attend for an annual refresher training once a year until the 1980s when numbers dropped so low that annual refresher training was discontinued. We would see this is very much missing a trick. If there are individuals who are PDF service leavers, with their wealth of qualifications and years of experience, they should be utilised for the benefit of the State in defence and to work with us in the second line reserve as reservists in the first line reserve. This is an area where active first line reservists could work in tandem with active second line reservists, which is what we represent. Certainly, there is fertile ground to establish an Air Corps reserve.

**Mr. Eugene Gargan:** The next questions came from Deputy Cowen with regard to the Air Corps. I think we have just answered that. Reference was made also to recruitment. If there is

only one thing members of the committee take away from this discussion today it is that recruitment is absolutely essential. It is an urgent issue that goes to the very heart of our existence. It needs to be addressed absolutely and quickly.

I will make another point, which touches on the sentiment expressed by the Deputy in his comments. I have often said that the status and the state of the Reserve is a bellwether. It is an indicator generally of the health of the Defence Forces overall. One could argue that if things are going well for the Reserve Defence Force then it is a reasonable assumption to make that throughout the other branches and echelons of the Defence Forces, things are going well also. In many ways, we are at the end of the conveyor belt. We are at the end of the list of things to be done. When Mr. Richardson talked about getting recruits through the medical checks, security clearances and all that kind of stuff, because it is dealing with the Reserve Defence Force, we get pushed to the end of the queue.

Understandably, I suppose, if Permanent Defence Force members are about to serve overseas or undertake various duties then it is essential to get them sorted out first. That is fine. We have never had a problem with that. The problem arises when we remain at the back of the queue and are never processed or do not get the resources required, ever. We do not progress from there. I would say, therefore, that it is a key indicator of how things are. If the Reserve Defence Force is doing well then one could assume that the rest of the Defence Forces are doing well.

One might look at it from the other perspective, that is, from the point of view of our colleagues in the more specialist roles. I picked the particular example of our comrades in the Army Ranger Wing, ARW. If we look at their experiences of late in trying to secure their pay and allowances and the difficulties they have had then it does not bode well for us. If they, as the tip of the spear - the very people and experts who are at the top of their profession and who are sent into the most hostile of places, including Kabul recently - have difficulties then where are we going to be? There are, therefore, two ways of looking at this. There is a continuum of expertise, if you like, and there is a continuum in a military context of where we are at. I wanted to make the point that that is a concern to us as well.

The final question then was from Senator Ó Donnghaile, which came via Deputy Brady, regarding 32-county recruitment. I am happy to take that question because, as I mentioned earlier, I am originally from County Cavan. I live in Dublin but I am posted in the 27 Infantry Battalion, which is headquartered in Dundalk. I am very proud to serve with the 27 Infantry Battalion. I can tell members that a significant number of personnel, both Permanent Defence Force and Reserve Defence Force, are from the Six Counties or from the North. They are quite happy to serve. They really want to serve and they make the journey down. It is quite surprising that some of our potential recruits have actually come from Belfast. That, I suppose, tells members something about the intent and the desire to serve that these people have. They are very keen. That is actually effectively happening already.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Gargan for that. I see that Deputy Stanton has his hand raised again.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I have two brief questions. The last time training camps were held was in 2019. I guess they were probably not held this year or last because of Covid-19 but perhaps I am wrong. Mr. Gargan might be able to give us an outline of the last training camps in terms of how many people attended, how they went and so on.

Is it still the case that members of the public service can take time off to take part in training

in summer camps or other training camps as was the case years ago? When I was there it was the case that one could take two weeks off. In some cases, some of that time off was paid as well but not all of it. Mr. Gargan might give us an update on that.

**Mr. Eugene Gargan:** I will hand the first question on training camps over to Mr. Richardson and I will take the second question.

**Mr. Neil Richardson:** To answer the Deputy's question, training camps for the Reserve Defence Force, or previously, Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil, FCA, units would have been arranged quite regularly, as he will be very familiar with from years past. What happened following the 2013 reorganisation of the Reserve Defence Force is that independent reserve units were stood down and post this date, all reservists have served as previously permanent-only units. To give an example, in Dublin, we would have the 7 Infantry Battalion based in Cathal Brugha Barracks. Headquarters, A and B companies and support companies will be permanent soldiers and C, D and E companies will be reservists. They are, therefore, all under the one flag, so to speak.

Unique reservist stand-alone training camps have sort of disappeared really since 2013. What now generally happens is that reservists will go on training with their Permanent Defence Force counterparts or they will be penny-packeted out to various training courses. Reservists are still attending a form of what would have been traditionally been called "annual camp" but it just might not be a concentration of reservists only anymore.

The Deputy mentioned 2019 and the hiatus on training camps. Yes, 2019 was our last normal training year. We have quoted the number of individuals who attended for paid training in that year. It was 1,019 individuals. At a time when the Reserve Defence Force had an official strength of 1,588 individuals, which is 75 more than it does now, we would argue that the 1,019 people who attended for paid training in 2019 was a far more accurate metric of how many active reservists we had. Those 1,019 people attended at least one paid day each that year. We would argue that the other 500 were just remnants on the personnel management system and are not necessarily there anymore in reality.

The arrival of Covid-19 in 2020 unfortunately resulted more or less in a shutdown of all normal Reserve Defence Force activity. It is worth stating that reservists did exist on Operation Fortitude, that is, the Defence Forces operation in support of the HSE. Generally, however, swab testers and vaccinators ultimately appeared in time but these were individuals who had a specialist qualification. The vast majority of the Reserve Defence Force was, therefore, stood down.

There has been a resumption of training camps again in 2021 albeit, I will say, of a particularly refined nature. A "reserve concentration", for want of a better phrase, took place in Kilworth Camp in County Cork during August, where two high-profile Reserve Defence Force courses resumed along with local support staff who came in. The irony perhaps is the 150 to 200 reservists who were present on the camp probably represented maybe 20% of what is left in the Reserve Defence Force. To most long-serving reservists from decades past, 200 individuals was a drop in the ocean in comparison to the numbers that attended reservist training in years gone by. What we are considering a high number now, therefore, would have been very bad year 20 years ago.

**Mr. Eugene Gargan:** The Deputy asked the question then about whether those in the service of the State, that is, the public service and Civil Service, can have some form of employment protection. Forgive me if I get it wrong but from memory I believe this goes back to Circular

51/1979, which provides for unpaid leave. I work in the private sector so I have never been able to invoke it directly like that. It allows for a number of days off, however. I think there are implications in terms of superannuation payments as well. If, therefore, a person spends every year throughout his or her working life taking a week or two off, it can have an implication towards the end of his or her working career. I can clarify that and revert to the Deputy. I do not think it is universally available for those in the rest of the public service, however. I think it is for the Civil Service only.

**Chairman:** Okay. I do not see any other member offering. I would like to bring matters to a conclusion. I thank the witnesses for their presentations, and the general secretary, in particular, for his lengthy but very informative presentation. I thank Mr. Richardson, Mr. Gargan and Ms McCarthy for the comprehensive manner in which they dealt with our questions.

I was struck by the very stark and direct nature of the presentation. I detect one note of optimism, however, and that is with regard to the positive expectations on the matter of the publication of the final report on the Commission on the Defence Forces.

I acknowledge with some real sense of disappointment, however, the fact that none of the recommendations in the White Paper of six years ago has even been initiated, as I believe Mr. Richardson said, much less completed. It is absolutely essential that whatever recommendations are contained in the Commission, there will be a timeline in respect of implementation. In fact, that was an issue we specifically raised in our encounter with the chairman of the Commission earlier in the year.

This meeting was timely. In fact, members were keen that we would have this engagement prior to the budget. In terms of next steps, therefore, I would be very keen, as indeed would members, that we give the Minister a short presentation arising from the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association's engagement with us, with particular reference to recruitment and the issue of funding. I hope that on the next occasion the witnesses appear before this committee we will be in a position to chart some positive developments, which, unfortunately, we have been unable to do this afternoon. Nevertheless, it was an important engagement with us, and we would be happy to follow up at the earliest opportunity, having regard to the fact that we are heading towards the closing cycle of budgetary negotiations. Notwithstanding that, the Minister will hear from us within the next 48 hours.

As for the matter of the legislative developments, the witnesses will be aware that much of the work on the new defence (amendment) Bill has been completed. I expect that will be completed in its entirety by the end of the year.

With that, I thank the witnesses for being with us. We look forward to a further encounter post publication of the report of the commission on the future of the Defence Forces.

I ask members to hold on because we have some private business.

The joint committee went into private session at 4.41 p.m. and adjourned at 4.47 p.m. until 3 p.m. on Tuesday, 12 October 2021.