

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS COSAINT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Dé Máirt, 16 Samhain 2021

Tuesday, 16 November 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Cathal Berry,	Catherine Ardagh,
John Brady,	Gerard P. Craughwell.
Sorca Clarke,	
Barry Cowen.	

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

Defence Forces Veterans: Discussion

Chairman: I have received apologies from Senators Joe O'Reilly and Diarmuid Wilson. Our agenda this afternoon is a meeting with representatives of the Defence Forces veterans' organisations to discuss issues facing their members. On behalf of the committee, I welcome from the Irish United Nations Veterans Association, Kieran Brennan, Major General, retired, who is no stranger to this committee, and Mr. John Murray, Sergeant Major, retired. I give a special welcome to retired sergeant Michael Thompson, the national welfare officer, from my home town, Mountmellick, in County Laois. He has been a friend of mine for longer than either of us would care to remember. From Óglaigh Náisiúnta na hÉireann, the Organisation of National Ex-Service Personnel, I welcome the chief executive officer, Mr. Ollie O'Connor, the chairperson of the board of directors, Mr. Colm Campbell, and Mr. George Kerton, who, I understand, is joining us remotely. I welcome Senator Craughwell, who will be known to all of the witnesses. The Senator is with us in the room. I welcome members who are joining us remotely, including Deputy Brady and Senator Ardagh, who I see online, among others.

We will hear the witnesses' opening statements, then have a discussion, with questions from members of the committee. I ask members to be concise with their questions to allow everybody an opportunity to participate. Hopefully, we will have an opportunity for a second round for people to come back in if they so desire. I apologise for the somewhat truncated format. This is because of Covid. Some members are in their offices and others are present. I regret that as we head towards the end of 2021, we are still operating under restricted circumstances, which is in accordance with our public health regime.

I advise witnesses of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make them in any way identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if any statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It goes without saying they will comply with any such direction.

I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect they should not comment on, criticise nor make charges against any person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make that person identifiable. They are allowed to participate in the meeting only if they are physically located in the Leinster House complex, which I understand to be the case for all members today.

I invite Mr. Campbell to make his opening statement. I understand it includes a PowerPoint presentation, which is being displayed. When he has finished, I will invite Mr. Brennan to make his opening statement, after which we will take questions from members.

Mr. Colm Campbell: I thank the Cathaoirleach and members for the invitation. I will provide an overview of ONE and discuss its strategic plan and goals, in particular in the context of veterans' policy. We will be happy to take questions at the end of the presentation.

The organisation was founded in 1951, in the aftermath of the major demobilisation following the Emergency - Second World War. That demobilisation had a great effect on veterans, leaving many of them homeless and in dire circumstances. The organisation transitioned in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when veterans were found dead on the streets of Dublin. The organisation, like IUNVA, believed that should not happen and that these people should be sup-

ported, and transitioned the organisation into the charity it is today. We opened our first home, in Queen Street, Dublin, in 1994 and replaced that home and added two more in 2005 and 2006. In 2007, we signed a service level agreement with the Department of Defence which, as I have often said, was not important for what was in it but because we now had a service level agreement with the Department. It gave the organisation official recognition.

In 2012, we opened our first veterans support centres, which can be simply explained as a cross between an advice centre and a men's or women's shed. They are somewhere to go for a cup of tea or, equally, to organise a bed for the night and so on. The 2015 White Paper on Defence included an embryonic veterans' policy. We, IUNVA, ARCO and the other associations welcomed that but stressed it was embryonic. Over the past three years, we have developed a nationwide network of these veterans support, drop-in centres. Senator Craughwell visited one we opened at Cathal Brugha Barracks the week before last. These veterans support centres were contained in the programme for Government of June 2020 and we welcomed that. This year and for the next two years, we are expanding our homelessness capacity nationwide to 60 bedrooms.

Today, ONE has 37 branches, 15 veterans support centres and four homes operating, namely: Brú Chostúim, Athlone, which has seven bedrooms; the recently opened Brú na Farraige, Cobh, which has five bedrooms and is receiving the final touches; Brú na bhFiann, Dublin, our flagship home, which has 35 bedrooms; and Brú Doire Feá, Letterkenny, with seven bedrooms. We are planning our Cork city branch in co-operation with Cork City Council and will have another meeting with the council next week. That will give us an additional six bedrooms, bringing the totality to 60 bedrooms nationwide.

Veterans support officers have been in place for the past year and a half to two years. They are counsellors, for want of a better term. In head office, they work in partnership with the Leopardstown Park Hospital Trust, one of our charity partners. As members will be aware, the trust was founded initially to look after veterans of the British army but now also supports veterans of the Defence Forces. At Brú na bhFiann, we have a full-time counsellor in partnership with the HSE Dublin north community healthcare area and are under discussions - we had a meeting two weeks ago - with the Cork-Kerry community healthcare area to provide a further counsellor in Cork city. In the greater Cork-Kerry area, there are five branches, two veterans support areas and two houses, and one counsellor covers all of that.

We also hold monthly medical clinics. Deputy Berry, who is a doctor, provides the multi-medical clinic on a voluntary basis in Dublin and another veteran provides a monthly medical clinic at our house in Athlone. We have about 1,000 members and about 2,100 supporters donate annually. We have a new website at one-veterans.org. Prior to the opening of the new house in Cork next year or the year after that, we have 54 beds, or about 20,000 bed nights every year. We have kept about 1,000 veterans safely off the streets and about 90% of those veterans progress to permanent accommodation.

If members remember nothing else from this briefing, I ask them to remember four words, namely, support, comradeship, advocacy and remembrance, because that is what ONE does. On support, members will see the mission statement on the slide, which is registered with the Charities Regulator and is stated in our constitution and our handbook of rules. It relates to providing accommodation through the houses and other supports through our veteran support centres and our branches.

On comradeship, I often say civilians have colleagues, whereas members of the Defence

Forces have comrades. That comradeship comes from a shared experience, a shared set of values and a willingness to serve. Advocacy relates in part to what we are doing at this meeting, while remembrance includes events such as the Niemba anniversary at Cathal Brugha Barracks last week.

If that is the mission, the values, which I do not think will be a stranger to any committee members, comprise commitment, compassion, comradeship, honesty, respect and, principally, service to others. That relates to helping fellow veterans who may be less fortunate, with no expectation of anything in return.

Strategy is all about means, ways and ends. The ends are the mission and values I just mentioned. The means include everything, such as ONE and other veterans' associations but Oireachtas committees such as this one as well. Finally, the ways are our eight strategic goals, which are wrapped around the veteran. Governance is first and foremost because in a charity, as members will well know as they have all been involved in charities, if the governance aspect is not done right, the rest will collapse. The other strategic goals comprise: support and awareness; a viable veterans' policy; financial stability; strengthening the organisation; the veterans support centres and the hospital network I mentioned; and a diversity and inclusion policy. We deliberately included the inclusion policy because there is sometimes a perception veterans' organisations are just for old men, and we as veterans' organisations need to change that and are addressing that actively. Veterans today leave the Defence Forces earlier than in the past, so we have to look after that coterie of veterans as well as the older veterans and those people who get into trouble.

I will now concentrate on one of the goals, that is, the veterans' policy. It seeks, in union with the other veterans' organisations and the Government, to ensure the continued development of a viable and sustainable Government veterans' policy. We define the veterans' policy as the declaration of the Government's political activities, plans and intentions relating to veterans of the Defence Forces. We believe veterans' policy requires a whole-of-government approach because many of the issues affecting veterans, such as housing and healthcare, do not fall within the remit of the Department of Defence or the Defence Forces. We have three priority areas in the veterans' policy domain, that is, the creation of an office of veterans affairs, research to underpin veterans' policy and a policy imprimatur for the essential work ONE does on behalf of veterans.

We formally proposed the creation of an office of veterans affairs in December 2017. We believe it is the key enabler to get the other work done. It would operate in a similar manner to the office of emergency planning, located in Agriculture House, and work with all relevant Departments and other key public authorities. The envisaged role of the veterans association is facilitating and co-ordinating the delivery of a range of services, providing opportunities to veterans to have their service acknowledged, managing the Government's relationship with veterans, advising the Government on veterans' issues and co-ordinating with other Departments and agencies on aspects of policy that relate to veterans. The main area of concentration is that it is not a Defence Forces or Department of Defence veterans' policy but an all-of-government veterans' policy.

Ourselves and IUNVA do much work in support of veterans. We have much evidence based on experience but we really believe that the veterans' policy should be underpinned by research on the impact of service and the needs of veterans. Earlier I spoke about 60 rooms for homeless veterans. We do not know whether there should be 80 or 50 rooms but we believe, based on our experience, that about 60 is right. We also believe that empirical evidence is required to move

that policy in the right direction. The research would include: family break-up among veterans; the prevalence of homelessness among the veteran community and other housing issues; the extent and impact of post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD; substance misuse; the impact of institutionalisation and other issues impacting on the transition to civilian life; the differing impact of service on male veterans, female veterans, veterans of differing sexual persuasions and orientation, and differing ethnicities; and of course suicide.

Earlier I mentioned that our veteran support centres and, indeed, the veteran support centres of IUNVA were included in the programme for Government on 15 June 2020. That gave policy *imprimatur* for those veteran support centres. We would like our other key areas to have equal policy *imprimatur* so that is our homes, counsellors and pathway for end-of-life care, which we operate with section 38 hospitals, and basic multi-annual. I do not think that either organisation is looking for huge money but we need basic multi-annual funding.

In summary, I have provided a snapshot of the last 70 years and what we have done in 2021 in ONE. I spoke about our strategic plan with our ways, means and ends. I specifically and deliberately spoke about one of our eight strategic goals, which is goal 3 on veterans' policy. We will take questions at the end.

Chairman: I ask that these slides might be circulated through our secretariat.

Mr. Colm Campbell: We gave them in last Friday.

Chairman: Do we have them?

Mr. Colm Campbell: Yes.

Chairman: Excellent because they are very good.

Mr. Kieran Brennan: I thank the Chairman and the distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for the invitation to attend. The Chairman has introduced all four of the IUNVA delegation and I wish to mention that between us we have completed 35 overseas tours of duty, including Mr. Kerton who has joined remotely.

The Irish Defence Forces has a long and distinguished history of supporting the United Nations that stretches back to 1958 when the first peacekeepers were deployed to Lebanon. Since then many thousands of Irish men and women have made a significant contribution to peace and security in many of the most challenging security environments in the world. Relative to the size of the Defence Forces the cost of that service has been high as 87 members of Óglaigh na hÉireann paid the ultimate price in their endeavours to provide a better life for others.

Two members of Óglaigh na hÉireann remain missing in action, namely, Trooper Patrick Mullins from Kilbehenny in Limerick following events in Elizebthville in the Congo in September 1961, and Private Caoimhín Seoige, Inis Oírr, the Aran Islands following an incident near the village of Dyar Ntar in South Lebanon in April 1981. I mention Trooper Mullins and Private Seoige as this year marks the 60th and 40th anniversary, respectively, of their disappearance. Today, as we gather in this historic building, it is appropriate that all of us, veterans and elected representatives, remember our fallen UN veterans, and particularly their families who continue to grieve the loss of loved ones to this day. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam uasal.

I will give an overview of Irish United Nations Veterans Association, IUNVA, was formed at a meeting on 10 February 1990 when a group of personnel, that was led by Major General

Vincent Savino, who is retired and is currently the president of IUNVA, identified a need to look after veterans and their families who had fallen on hard times, and where in some instances the State had failed them. The constitution of IUNVA was ratified at its first annual general conference in October 1990. Today, IUNVA is a recognised not-for-profit veterans association that is based on the principle of volunteerism and providing support to others, which is in line with the ethos and values of our veterans.

As a registered charity, IUNVA is compliant with all governance structures as per the Charity Regulator. IUNVA has in place a robust management structure where the executive committee, who are elected at its annual general convention, run the association on a day-to-day basis. IUNVA is a non-denominational, non-political and non-sectarian association where membership is open to any Irish resident who has successfully completed a tour of duty with a UN force or organisation whether he or she has retired or not.

IUNVA, like our colleagues in ONE is organised on a regional basis with 21 posts that are located throughout the country with many within or adjacent to military installations. IUNVA members affiliated to their local posts gather, provide support to one another and reminisce about completed overseas trips. Most importantly, it is through this network that the executive committee of IUNVA manage and co-ordinate post activities across the full spectrum.

IUNVA remains unique within the veterans' organisations in that among our more than 1,200 members we have both retired and serving members. The headquarters of IUNVA is located in 1 Post Arbour House where we recently opened a museum that is dedicated to our veterans service overseas. I hope that Members might get to visit the museum in the future.

I will outline the aims and objectives of IUNVA. They are: to ensure that the memory of those who gave their lives in the cause of peace on United Nations service is not forgotten; to provide advice and assistance for members and their families; to encourage, help and assist in the treatment of members who have been adversely affected by their service overseas; to establish, maintain and encourage contact with associations similarly constituted in Ireland and other countries; to promote public understanding of the Irish role in the United Nations operations; to promote and protect the interests of its members; to establish a scheme or schemes to benefit members and their dependants; to rent, take or lease or otherwise acquire property for the purposes of the association and invest the funds of the association in such property or in investment accounts; and to publish pamphlets, periodicals and other documents for the purpose of furthering the interests of the association and its members. Finally, for the purpose of promotion and achievement of the above objectives, to raise money by subscription of its members and-or raise funds by other lawful means that may be necessary from time to time, and to secure repayment of any money in any manner whatsoever.

In terms of funding, as a volunteer organisation all funding received is used to run the association in a professional manner and in the best interests of its members. The Department of Defence makes an annual contribution of €11,000 towards the running of IUNVA, which is small in the context of what we deliver for our members. A case to increase funding to €50,000 has been with the Minister for some time now and we await a positive outcome. I wish to acknowledge funding of €88,000 that has been provided by the Department from dormant accounts, of which a significant portion was used to refurbish our newly opened IUNVA museum.

IUNVA members, with the assistance of the finance branch of the Department in Galway, pay a monthly subscription of €2, which is a valuable revenue stream. IUNVA, like our colleagues in ONE, are indebted to donations that we receive and a recent contribution of €6,000

from the Leopardstown Park Hospital Trust was greatly appreciated. This funding was used to conduct a much-needed first aid mental health course for post welfare officers who now have the skillset to allow them better support veterans with mental health issues that have resulted from their overseas service.

In the context of activities, on a weekly basis IUNVA members are involved in a myriad of activities with the welfare of our members at its core. Ceremonially, we support the families of veterans at funerals by providing appropriate military honours while the anniversary of veterans who died on overseas service is remembered on an annual basis.

First Aid courses that covering cardiopulmonary resuscitation, CPR and-or defibrillator usage are available to our members as required. IUNVA is actively involved in the provision of food parcels for members in need, particularly at Christmas time, and we are grateful for the support received from various businesses. IUNVA also provides accommodation for a number of UN veterans in the Curragh and is actively looking at for more opportunities in this area.

Support for veterans with mental health and other associated issues remains a priority. IUNVA participates in all State and local ceremonial events in its distinctive green blazer with the blue beret of the United Nations. Regardless of affiliation IUNVA will always provide assistance to veterans and their families in need.

IUNVA maintains strong relationships with the Defence Forces with some of its members still serving. Liaison officers are available in all military locations to assist IUNVA as the need arises. IUNVA receives excellent support from brigade and unit commanders in the provision of facilities for our members to conduct meetings and hold functions as required. The Defence Forces Benevolent Fund provides much-needed funding to IUNVA on a case-by-case basis. IUNVA continues to have good relationships with the Department of Defence having met the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Secretary General, Jacqui McCrum, in the past 12 months. In fact, we are having this year's meeting with the Minister tomorrow week. This interaction is much needed and appreciated. Funding, in the form of an annual subvention from the Department of Defence which is governed by a service level agreement, remains an issue and our aspiration to appoint a full-time administrator to manage the ever-increasing activities of IUNVA will also depend on financial support from the Department of Defence. IUNVA continues to get excellent support from the pensions section in the finance branch in Galway. We continue to have close relationships with our colleagues in the Association of Retired Commissioned Officers, ARCO, and the Organisation of National Ex-Service Personnel.

I will now move on to the White Paper and veterans strategy. My remarks will complement those of Mr. Campbell. Paragraph 7.7 of the White Paper on Defence published in 2015 states "there is scope during the currency of the White Paper to further develop supports available to existing personnel and veterans." This translated into project 59 of the White Paper implementation plan, one of 90 such projects identified from the White Paper. To advance this, on 5 December 2018 the three veteran associations, ARCO, IUNVA and the Organisation of Retired Ex-Service Personnel, submitted a document titled "Veterans Strategy" to the then Minister for Defence, the Secretary General and the Chief of Staff. This strategy includes strategic goals relating to seven areas: interface with Department of Defence and Defence Forces, transition from military to civilian life, accreditation of unique military skills, pensions and ancillary support, medical support, social housing and recognition of military service. To date, no progress has been made in advancing the aims of this document in a holistic manner despite it continually being an item on the agenda when meeting Department of Defence representatives. In February of this year, IUNVA was informed that project 59 had been closed. This decision was

very disappointing not least as it was taken without any reference to IUNVA and other veteran organisations. IUNVA remains hopeful that a veterans strategy will come to fruition in the short to medium term. This will require the support of many stakeholders, not least our elected representatives.

Notwithstanding the development of this strategy and subsequent policies to support it, IUNVA strongly advocates for the immediate establishment of a joint office for veterans' affairs supported by the veterans associations and resourced by the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence. Such an office, with the capacity to link into other Government Departments, would provide veterans with a platform through which issues of importance could be addressed by policymakers. IUNVA considers that the appointment of a commissioner for veterans' affairs, which would be in line with other European countries, would further demonstrate the State's commitments to veterans and the value it places on their outstanding service both on the island and overseas.

I will sum up by saying that IUNVA's mission statement speaks to remembering, honouring and caring. That sums up the ethos and values of the organisation and its members. I thank members of the committee for their attention.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Brennan and Mr. Campbell. I will open the meeting to members of the committee. They may address questions not only to Mr. Brennan and Mr. Campbell, but to the other witnesses. I see that we are joined online by Deputies Stanton and Brady. I welcome Deputies Cowen and Clarke. Senator Craughwell has had to leave to go to the Seanad but he assures me that he will be back. Obviously, he has some specialist knowledge of this area. I would be happy to support the call for the introduction of a veterans strategy. That is important and would acknowledge not only the work of the organisations which their representatives have outlined, but also the work I know they do at constituency level and have done at national level over recent years. I have seen the importance of this work and I am extremely disappointed to note that the Department of Defence contribution to that work is no more than €11,000. I, of course, acknowledge the funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund but that tends to be a little less certain and definite in its disbursement. Although I know the organisations expend every cent to the greatest benefit, that €11,000 is a paltry sum when one considers the work they do, the members they have and the strategy they wish to implement. I know they will raise that issue in their meeting with the Minister, Deputy Coveney, next week. We support the putting together of a strategy. I assure the witnesses of the help and assistance of this committee in that regard.

I am pleased to give the floor to Deputy Brady, who is joining us remotely from his office due to Covid restrictions. He will be followed by Deputy Clarke and other members.

Deputy John Brady: I thank Mr. Campbell and Mr. Brennan for their opening statements and for coming before the committee this afternoon. The two statements were excellent and very informative but also very disappointing. I concur with some of the sentiments the Chairperson has expressed with regard to the excellent work the witnesses have done for the State over many years both as serving members of our forces and through their veterans' organisations. It is disappointing to see how low the level of funding is and that a request for a small increase, up to €50,000, has fallen on deaf ears. I did not see any specific mention of funding for the Organisation of National Ex-Service Personnel, ONE, so I am not sure how much State funding it gets annually. Perhaps Mr. Campbell could outline that.

I also concur with regard to the veterans strategy. That is key, as is the proposed office of

veterans' affairs. I know that request has been made since 2017. Will the witnesses outline what engagement has taken place with the Ministers and the Department? What kind of feedback has there been?

I hear what Mr. Campbell is saying. Obviously, everything needs to be based on evidence. We need the data and the information. That is crucial to developing a plan and a strategy. I hear what he is saying with regard to accommodation for veterans who are homeless. His organisation estimates that there is a need for 60 beds. Will he elaborate further on that? I also note that he said it is hoped to open six additional beds in Cork next year. Will he give us a little bit more information on that? When exactly will they be opened?

I will home in on the issue of transitional supports. From my engagement with members of the Defence Forces, I know they feel there is a vacuum in that regard. The current system is totally inadequate. It does not enhance or develop the skills members have gained while in the Defence Forces or prepare them for the transition to civilian life. I have always called for a career guidance position to be created in that regard. I note that both organisations are calling for transitional supports to be put in place. Will they paint a picture as to how they see that role and how it would work? That is it for now. I may have some supplementary questions. I commend the work both organisations are doing and thank them both for their continued service to the State.

Deputy David Stanton: I welcome the representatives from both organisations and thank them for the work they are doing. I was recently at the opening of the ONE centre in Cobh. It was extraordinarily impressive and there was a large turnout. It was great to see it occurring there. I know Mr. Campbell was there as well. I was at the opening of IUNVA's post 25 in Fermoy a number of years ago. Again, that is doing great work.

I served as an amateur in the Reserve Defence Force for years so I have some knowledge of what goes on, although obviously not overseas. I want to ask about what Deputy Brady raised, that is, the transition and preparation for leaving the Defence Forces. We know there is a lot of support when one is a member of the Defence Forces and the comradeship that was mentioned earlier is hugely important. When one leaves, unless one has family support or whatever else outside, that can have an impact. I ask the witnesses to comment on the preparation for retirement or leaving the Defence Forces. What is in place there? Is it adequate? Could it be improved upon in any way?

I am also struck by both organisations' references to mental health, particularly IUNVA and the impact serving abroad has on some members. Mr. Brennan might expand on that and give us some examples of what is happening and how we can assist and help. What kind of impact does that have and why does it happen to people? Can we do more to assist people in that regard?

I also want to comment on the remembrance commemorations that occur across the country. I recognise the role that both organisations play through their members turning up. The branch in Cobh in my constituency is particularly active. It is hugely important that that happens because it happens in public. We have parades in public, as well as the flag-raising, the trooping of the colours, the speeches and so forth. That is hugely important and that is something we must continue and the organisations need to be supported.

I join with the Chair in saying I would be very supportive of the Government providing more funding to both organisations. I am also intrigued by the commission for veterans' affairs

that has been mentioned. I am quite disappointed that project 59 has been closed. Perhaps we should write to the Minister to see why that happened, what the thinking behind it was and if it can be reactivated. I again thank both organisations for the work they are doing and for being here today.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank our guests. Please accept my apologies for being tardy as there was a vote in the Dáil. I do not think they will find much objection to the witnesses' asks, particularly at this committee. In fairness, there is a very broad level of support for the work they do, for our veterans today but also our veterans to come.

I would like to touch on some specific questions. Mr. Brennan spoke about medical needs. Is he seeing something in veterans today that is specific to their service? As we age and go through life we can develop various different medical conditions and medical needs but is there a link between what the veterans are experiencing now and their service in the past? If that is the case, what supports are in place for those individuals, whether for physical or mental health?

Mr. Brennan also mentioned a benevolent fund. I ask him to give us some more detail on what is behind that and what are the asks with regard to this fund.

I have to be honest; I am beyond concerned to hear that food parcels are being handed out to our veterans. I find that absolutely despicable. It is a horrendous thing to hear any organisation say of those who have given their service in the past.

There was also mention of an advice clinic. I ask the witnesses to give us a bit more detail about what veterans are looking for advice on. Is it applications to State agencies for support and assistance, or perhaps passport services? What exactly are the questions that tend to come forward?

I echo what previous contributors have said about the veterans' strategy being way beyond overdue. It must be put in place as a matter of priority because the reality is that, for a very modest investment, the return that comes back is multiple. I thank the witnesses for their time.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I also apologise for being late. I have no specific questions other than those that have already been asked. I commend both the organisations for making themselves available to the committee and presenting to it. I also thank their extended membership for the work they do and the commitment they give in their own communities. I see the organisations very vividly in my own constituency and appreciate their work and effort. I am mindful of the commitment they make and their ethos about honouring, remembering and caring. Thankfully that is as evident today as it should be.

I join with the Chair in his observations and commitments on departmental funding and project 59. The committee will be as one in our efforts to make progress in that regard, right across party lines, in an attempt to acknowledge and appreciate and support the witnesses' on-going efforts.

Mr. Colm Campbell: On State funding for ONE, at the moment it takes a little short of €1 million in non-capital funding per annum to run ONE. Our accounts are online on our website. I think it was €968,000 last year for non-capital funding but that did not include the costings for Cobh. We currently get €100,000 from the Department of Defence. We recently applied for an increase in that but it would be wrong to comment on that as it was only recently.

Our Dublin hostel, Brú na bhFiann in Smithfield, gets partly funded by the Dublin Regional

Homeless Executive which, as the committee knows, runs the homeless sector on behalf of the four councils in Dublin. We get approximately €270,000 or €280,000 per annum from it. One of our counsellors is paid for by the HSE, as I mentioned, so that is €45,000 per annum for that counsellor. That is the State funding, give or take, and then we raise the rest of it ourselves through fundraising, membership fees and donations. Our residents all pay for their keep as well. It is very important to say that because we are preparing our residents to move into permanent accommodation and one of the key things there is to make sure they look after themselves properly, look after the rooms they are given properly and pay for their keep. They must get used to looking after themselves. I hope that answers Deputy Brady's question on funding

As we said, we believe that the creation of an office of veterans' affairs, similar in construct to the office of emergency planning in Agriculture House, is central to not just creating a veterans' policy but to delivering on whatever that policy is. As I said earlier, most of the issues that we come up against are not defence-related. They are issues of housing and health. Those are the two key issues we come up against all the time. Mr. O'Connor and I then have to try to find contacts in that regard. That would be much better done if we had somewhere to go, such as a single point of contact where we could go if we had an issue in health and the person in the office of veterans' affairs would get onto his or her contact in the Department of Health and try to resolve that. In the last few weeks we have had meetings with the HSE, Cork County Council and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. We are not experts in these areas and we have to find those contacts. They are great once we meet them but it could be better facilitated by having this office of veterans' affairs. I think we are making progress on it, to answer Deputy Brady's question. We met with the Secretary General of the Department of Defence quite recently on this matter and we also met with the Commission on the Defence Forces. We brought up one single issue with it and that was the veterans' policy. That commission is reporting next month. I am hopeful it will report favourably in that regard. The figure of 60 beds nationwide is just from experience. Mr. O'Connor probably has more information on that than I would.

Mr. Ollie O'Connor: We believe that 60 beds, from our experience going back to 2005, would adequately cover the number of homeless veterans at any given time. We could be wrong because there is no research and we are using our experience and anecdotal evidence on that. When we have 60 beds we will know then.

Mr. Colm Campbell: We had a big gap in the Cork area. Our original three homes were in Athlone, Letterkenny and Dublin. Approximately one fifth of all Defence Forces veterans are in the greater Cork area. That is between Collins Barracks, the naval base and the bases that are closed down in Ballincollig and Fermoy. Approximately one fifth of all veterans reside in that greater area. That is why we are putting approximately one fifth of our resources into the greater Cork area.

Mr. Kieran Brennan: I support the comments that were made by Mr. Campbell in respect of the office of veteran affairs, as well as the need for having a veterans strategy underpinned by policies in exactly the same format as Mr. Campbell articulated. It is important because it also would institutionalise veterans as an important part of Irish society. At present, a veteran leaves the Defence Forces who might go out after a full career, like myself, or alternatively might go into a civilian employment. They just go back into society. A veterans' association and a veterans' office would be hugely important.

Deputies Brady and Stanton spoke about issues in relation to supports available to personnel leaving the Defence Forces. By way of explanation, in my last appointment in the Defence

Forces, one of my key areas of interest was on how can we best support people who leave the Defence Forces either early or at the end of their careers. We instituted a policy of continuous professional development in the Defence Forces, which I have no doubt is continuing. It allowed people to develop the skill sets that were easily translatable out in civilian life. To explain exactly what that means, we linked up with the Institute of Technology Carlow, which allowed for non-commissioned officers and private soldiers to acquire skill sets that were associated with levels of competence in the university sector. For example, people could have a level 6, level 7 or level 8 degree coming out of Institute of Technology Carlow, which included a recognition of their prior learning, plus associated work that they did in Carlow. My good colleague who is present, Mr. Murray, is a product of that. There certainly are supports for people to develop skill sets and have them recognised when they go out into civilian life. Of course, as people leave the Defence Forces, there is a retirement course conducted which gives them information on how best to deal with some of the issues they will face as they go into civilian life. As I said, that is where it was up to recently. I presume that it is still continuing. Would Mr. Campbell like to add anything to that, because I know he was involved in this process as well?

Mr. Colm Campbell: Mr. O'Connor and I spoke to what they called the transition to civilian life course. It was the pre-retirement course. The vast majority of people leaving the Defence Forces do not retire anymore. The word "retire" suggests that they are going to a pension, or something like that. They are going out to civilian life. If I could mention one thing, it is that there is a huge number of skilled people in the Defence Forces. It is moving them on to civilian life. For instance, they could easily transfer to the public sector, Departments and State agencies, but they are probably precluded from doing so now through pension abatement and issues like that. It is probably something that could be looked at.

They get fantastic skills in the Defence Forces, but sometimes those skills are not codified in language that an employer may understand. If, for example, Mr. Murray was a sergeant major, we all know what a sergeant major means but the prospective employer may not know that. The sergeant major is in charge of and runs the HR for 400 or 500 people, for instance. They should put it in that plain, simple language. We believe that the testimonial, as it is called in the Defence Forces, which is the equivalent of a reference, needs attention as well.

Mr. Ollie O'Connor: The testimonial, as Mr. Campbell said, is four lines on a small page. Deputy Stanton asked about mental health first aid. I will share this with IUNVA. We have trained in the past year 70 mental health first aiders. We have two veterans support officers and we have clinicians, as we said earlier to Deputy Berry. We have another clinician in Athlone. We find now that particularly the veteran support office who is at the head office, because he reports directly to me, is dealing with everything from suicidal ideation to the payment of an electricity bill. We can handle the electricity bill through the Defence Forces benevolent fund of which we spoke. We are very involved with the Defence Forces benevolent fund. Some of us here are on the executive of the Defence Forces benevolent fund. If things are done right, we can help veterans. However, many veterans do not know about the Defence Forces benevolent fund and that is a problem. Mr. Brennan might talk about this, because I know IUNVA has trained mental health first aiders as well.

Mr. Kieran Brennan: Deputy Clarke spoke about her lack of knowledge of the Defence Forces benevolent fund, which is not well known. The Defence Forces benevolent fund is a fund that is set up within the Defence Forces, where serving members of Defence Forces make a subscription to it. It is used for various reasons. The veterans associations have been able to get access to that funding over the last number of years. As I said, along with colleagues in

ONE, we do it on a case-by-case basis. I will give one example of a recent case that we put forward of an old soldier, who had served in the Army apprentice school in Naas and who died a number of years ago. His grave in Naas needed refurbishment and it had no headstone. This was not fitting for an old soldier who served his country well, not just at home but overseas. Mr. Thompson, who I will ask to speak about mental health issues in a moment, put in a case to the benevolent fund. We got the funding to put a proper headstone and a proper surround around that veteran's grave. There was also a small commemoration to remember him. That just shows the type of value of the Defence Forces benevolent fund, which I commend for supporting the veterans. All of them will become veterans in due course.

On mental health, the Deputy asked a question about the linkage between overseas service and mental health issues at home. Obviously, I am not a professional so I cannot definitively say, but based on my personal experience of traumas that people have experienced overseas and, indeed, some of my own personal experience, my own personal, private view is that there is a definite link in respect of that. I will ask my colleague, Mr. Thompson, who is our national welfare officer to speak briefly on that particular issue of mental health in respect of IUNVA veterans.

Mr. Michael Thompson: Good afternoon a Chathaoirligh and the committee. We want to thank you for the opportunity, as both associations said, for giving us a chance to talk. I would also like to thank the Cathaoirleach as we are two people from the same town of Mountmellick. We are running CPR courses, defibrillator courses and mental health first aid courses, as Mr. O'Connor has mentioned. As a matter of fact, this Friday we are running another CPR defibrillator course in our drop-in centre in Athlone. Once we leave the Defence Forces, we cannot have access to the personal support services any longer. The personal support services are for access by serving personnel who are dealing with mental health problems. We then have to go ourselves to get help for housing and mental health and all that affects our veterans. That is the help that we need. We are not professionals. For instance, our local post in Portlaoise is in the Reserve Defence Force, RDF, building in Portlaoise. That is because of the goodness of the Defence Forces. They are moving to a new building in the next year or two. We have been told that we will have two rooms in there. If we did not have the RDF building in Portlaoise, we would have nowhere to meet. We would not have the money to rent somewhere else. We are in the local community supporting the local community. We have all served. We have drop-in centres throughout the country, in Athlone, Fermoy and Clonmel, but we pay rent on most of those buildings. We do not pay rent on the one in Portlaoise. As I said, we are there with the support of the Defence Forces. Individual veterans have to turn up in the HSE's offices looking for help. The access we had while serving is gone. Once we take off that uniform and walk out, we do not have that access.

The other main thing is the Army benevolent fund, of which both IUNVA and ONE are members. It is a great opportunity for veterans. We are the eyes and the ears out there for the Defence Forces Benevolent Fund. We have plots in Bohernabreena, Donegal, Athlone and Mullingar. Our aim is to make sure that no veteran is left in a pauper's grave. Earlier this year we buried a veteran in one of our cemeteries in Dublin. The Defence Forces Benevolent Fund paid for the opening of the plot but he was buried in one of our plots. We put a plaque on the plot. He will be remembered. Just last Saturday, in Portlaoise, in our local post, we brought in the family of one of our colleagues. We framed his medals and presented that to his family. That is very important to families. We are proud to wear the medals we wear and proud to serve, as Mr. Campbell said. I heard Deputy Stanton talk about the opening of post 25 in Fermoy. That post has been supporting the Mullins family every year at the mass in Kilbeheny.

Every year IUNVA remembers Patrick Mullins. Like every other veteran, as members of the two organisations have said, we in the veterans' organisations will not forget him. We go to the church and run the flags up the church. The Defence Forces put up a memorial for him in the graveyard in Kilbeheny a few years ago as well.

Mr. Brennan mentioned outside courses. Even for lower-ranking veterans leaving the Army, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, FETAC, courses are brilliant to do. I did one such course. I left the Army then and went to work in the hospital in Tullamore. I started off there as a porter. Through the FETAC course, I ended up going back and becoming a radiographer assistant because I had military training. For the soldier who is leaving and who may not have completed his leaving certificate, the FETAC courses are brilliant to do. As Mr. Brennan said, Mr. Murray beside us has done a course in Carlow.

We need more support for our veterans. We have a house in the Curragh where veterans live. We have a house in Cavan, in respect of which negotiations are ongoing with the council. We hope we may be allowed to build onto that house and put a few more veterans in it. They come in of a Thursday morning for the cup of tea and the chat, as Mr. Campbell said. We hear what their problems are. We try to support them in typing up letters and dealing with social services. That is where the veterans' office comes in. We need more support. As I said, if we did not have the post in Portlaoise, where would we meet? We are based completely on voluntary money. None of us are getting paid. Just last weekend, I put in Thursday, Friday and Saturday supporting veterans. We had a GoFundMe fundraiser set up through the sergeant major in the 27th Battalion to help the people of Lebanon. We raised something like €2,500 through social media with ex-members of the Defence Forces' support. We presented a cheque. A chap who served in Lebanon died and had no headstone. We in ONE went up there and IUNVA and ONE are supporting the erection of a headstone over that veteran's grave. He served his country. He should not be buried without a headstone in a pauper's grave. That is where our veterans association comes in.

I thank the committee and the Chairman for the opportunity to come in, to talk to the committee and to get our point across.

Chairman: Mr. Brennan, are you done with those questions?

Mr. Kieran Brennan: I wish to respond to Deputy Stanton. He spoke about our role in commemorations, and I commend him on that because our veterans associations feel it is very important. In fairness, the Government and the Department of Defence are very inclusive in this respect, and we value that participation in national days of commemoration and various other commemorations. I hope that this will continue into the future. Again, the veterans affairs office would further institutionalise that whole process going forward.

Chairman: We are joined by two veterans in their own right, Senator Craughwell and Deputy Berry. Before I call on them, I wish to refer to a point Deputy Clarke made when she mentioned in Mr. Brennan's presentation the reference to food parcels. I fully agree with Deputy Clarke. Is Mr. Brennan seriously saying that some members of the blue berets, who have served abroad with distinction on behalf of the Army and the Irish people, are in receipt of food parcels and, in effect, are destitute on the streets of Ireland? If that is the case, it is a most unacceptable spectre that will have to be dealt with as a matter of urgency. Mr. Brennan might make brief reference to it in terms of numbers or instance. It is a shocking spectre of the manner in which our veterans are being treated.

I refer to Mr. Campbell's contribution, in which he made reference to the consequences of the pandemic, which I would have thought have added considerably to the challenges of both organisations. Mr. Campbell might be in a position to give us some examples of how ONE and its members are dealing with the challenges of Covid-19 added to an already challenging situation with reference to ONE's role and function.

I thank Mr. Brennan and Mr. Campbell. Mr. Thompson might comment on the matter of the food parcels.

Mr. Kieran Brennan: To be clear on this, there is no suggestion that members of IUNVA are destitute and living on the streets. That is not the insinuation. Many challenges face civil society across the full spectrum in respect of the challenges of paying rent, paying for food and paying all the household bills. There can sometimes be a need for a small bit of support to be given to some veterans to allow them to have a better standard of living. There is no suggestion that there is anybody destitute on the streets. That is not what we are saying. I ask Mr. Thompson to give a very short résumé of what we do in respect of food parcels, how we deliver them and where they come from.

Mr. Michael Thompson: I will give the committee a brief example. In post 1, Arbour Hill, they go out to Tallaght every week and collect from FoodCloud and make up 30 parcels to give out to veterans' families. In some of the families they support, the veteran could have passed away. They bring out the parcels to the veterans or their families. It is all done anonymously. They go to FoodCloud, collect food, bring it back to the post, make up the parcels and give them out to the families. That is one example.

Chairman: Mr. Campbell might comment on Covid.

Mr. Colm Campbell: The initial effect of the Covid pandemic is that we kept it out of the hostels and homes for a long time. Of late, Covid-19 is getting more prevalent and we had a case quite recently. However, our homes had to become more restrictive. What was normal in our homes two to three years ago, social interaction and being able to come and go, could not happen. Many of our residents found it challenging. There is little doubt about that. Our veterans support centres and our branches were all but closed, but we met remotely. What Mr. O'Connor did, and I will ask him to talk about it, was equip our welfare officers with mobile telephones, IT systems and so forth. He set up WhatsApp groups to keep veterans in contact. Remember that many of our veterans are quite elderly, but their ability to transition to new platforms is extraordinary.

From a financial point of view, it affected our fundraising. I am looking at the figures in our audited account. Our collections in 2019 were €142,000. In 2020, it was €288. It went from €142,000 to €288. I must say, on a positive note, the Covid stability funds through Pobal gave us great assistance.

What we are looking for is in respect of our future residents, the people who may not be homeless today but who might become homeless tomorrow or the day after. There is an increase in rental costs after Covid-19. The costs of purchasing or renting houses are only going one way. Then there are the social pressures on families because of Covid. There is an increase in gambling, alcohol abuse and drug abuse. There is also the stress of Covid on families. Approximately 50% of our residents, and I am open to correction on that figure, arrive because of family break up. I believe that is quite standard in the homelessness sector throughout the country.

There are impacts on many levels. On a positive level, we certainly thank the Government for the funding we received through the Pobal scheme. However, as we transition out of Covid, and I realise the transition is probably going to be a lot longer than we expected, that is where the real challenges will lie.

Chairman: Deputy Stanton has a supplementary question arising out of an earlier discussion. I will take his question now for Mr. Brennan and Mr. Campbell and then I will call Senator Craughwell.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank our guests for a very interesting presentation. It struck me when the presentations were being made that the membership of both organisations appears to be quite low given the total number of people who have left the Defence Forces. I understand there are 13,000 plus on the pension payroll if my figures are correct. Why are more people who served in the Defence Forces not involved in both organisations? Can anything be done to assist in growing the membership? Obviously, if there were more members, the good work the organisations do would be made known to more people and there would be more support from former members as well.

It was mentioned earlier, I think by IUNVA, that it is a little like the Men's Shed, where people come together. Is it mainly men who are receiving assistance? I realise there is an imbalance in the Defence Forces between men and women, but perhaps the witnesses would comment on that. Would I be correct in saying that many of the people the organisations deal with are single? Is there something in that with respect to loneliness and not having the support of family?

They were the two questions that struck me.

Mr. Ollie O'Connor: With regard to the membership and why it is low, it is a 21st century problem that people are not joining. All the clubs we remember from when we were young, such as the men's clubs and card clubs, are all gone. People are looking at their tablets or their televisions. People who have left the Defence Forces have worn a uniform for all their time in the Defence Forces. When they join our organisation, and I believe IUNVA might be the same, they do not have to wear a uniform, but they do not really believe that. That is a problem.

As regards women, we are currently developing a diversity and inclusion policy. For the first time, we have two women directors on the board of directors. One was co-opted because of her skills and the other was elected by the membership. We hope to grow our women membership and our membership generally, because we cannot operate without membership. That is a problem.

Regarding something else that was said earlier, the Defence Forces is an institution. Similar to all institutions, the members' behaviours are modified. Then they leave. When I left the Defence Forces, for example, I realised I had to pay for inhalers. All of that had been done previously. The cloak that was around the person previously is no longer there. The vast majority of people who leave the Defence Forces do not have a pension. It is only those who have served 21 years, as it was in my time, and now it is 30 years since the passing of the single pensions Act. We have to get over the perception people have that everyone who leaves the Defence Forces has a pension. People who leave the Defence Forces have the same problems as everyone else in society and they do not always like going to somebody else to try to solve their problems. They have been problem solvers throughout their career in the Defence Forces, and now it is themselves. That is where we come in. It could be for a cup of tea, and a couple

of weeks later one finds there is a real problem.

Chairman: Does that answer your question, Deputy Stanton?

Deputy David Stanton: Yes, it does. It is quite interesting. I welcome the fact that women are involved. That is very important. Another issue mentioned earlier was pension abatement being a barrier to people entering the public service. Perhaps that is something we should look at as well, Chairman. It is an important point. I also know that some members of the Defence Forces, and their military skills were mentioned, are being headhunted by companies that value such skills, such as discipline, organisation and so forth. I have heard about that happening in my area. I just wish to acknowledge the fact that the skills people learn and acquire in the Defence Forces are highly valued and sought after in business and elsewhere.

Mr. Kieran Brennan: I will ask Mr. Murray to comment briefly on membership, in line with Mr. O'Connor's comments.

Mr. John Murray: We are very similar to ONE except that with the UN service one is qualified to be a member with a tour of duty overseas. I stepped off the pitch in the Defence Forces last year and I was one of the older generation in that I got to run to the finish line at 60 years old. However, the younger generation is retiring after 21 years and may have done, perhaps, one or two missions overseas. When I was overseas there were 760 troops. There was a great deal of sport and camaraderie over there, but now the young lad is on his iPhone. The troops do not gel as much or the friendship is not there as much. They are fairly isolated in their daily jobs compared with what we did, which was more outdoors and more adventurous with more patrols. The overseas experience now is very contained. We have a challenge, which is to get involved with the troops before they travel, explain who we are and what our experience was, to keep that relationship going while they are overseas and to have a briefing on their experience when they come back. We have challenges all the time. We will rise to that challenge, get new membership and go their way in how our association should be in the future to make it attractive to them. It is a challenge for us, but we are up for it.

Chairman: I call Senator Craughwell and he will be followed by Deputy Berry.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I welcome all my former colleagues. I am sorry I missed a small part of their presentations as I had to attend the Order of Business. The first matter regarding membership and retaining membership is an issue we encountered during my time in the Teachers Union of Ireland. Teachers retired after their service, melted away and were lost to the organisation. The Retired Members Association put in place a pre-retirement programme, part of which involved the association meeting people who were about to leave and encouraging them to join it. I do not know whether the witnesses' organisations have that facility, but they can address the matter in a few moments.

Three or four years ago, I introduced the Defence (Veterans Lapel Badge) Bill in the Seanad. It was a simple little Bill and the idea behind it was to give a singular form of branding, as it were, to every veteran who left. The idea comes from the UK, where every veteran who has at least one year's service and leaves without any blemish on his or her record is entitled to apply for a veteran's pin. To aid and abet the organisations' memberships, if both of them were in a position to issue a veterans lapel pin were it to come into force, they would have a database of all veterans throughout the country. It would help the organisations to grow. I am interested in the witnesses' views on this suggestion.

A number of the witnesses are familiar with Mr. Danny Kinahan from Northern Ireland. They will be aware that the commissioner's office was not an easy transition and that it took some time to put in place, although the one in Britain came about quite easily. I would be interested in hearing their views on two matters, the first of which is the importance of a veterans office. They may have dealt with this idea in my absence. The second matter is the importance of the role of commissioner and how it might fit into their organisations.

Mr. Brennan mentioned education. I believe he was a major general when he invited me to Carlow for a graduation ceremony. It is one of the great innovations of the Defence Forces in modern times that no soldier needs to leave without an academic skill of some sort or other, be it Further Education and Training Awards Council, FETAC, Quality and Qualifications Ireland or whatever. In Mr. Brennan's service days, was any effort ever made to link up with organisations like Microsoft, Hewlett Packard, Intel and other large companies? In the UK, there is a veterans programme where some large organisations show a natural bias towards veterans by taking in and training a small number of them each year. I do not know whether that is something that the Defence Forces has explored, but I would be interested in knowing.

I believe it was 1979 or 1980 when I was walking up a street in Limerick and met a former member of my old battalion, An Chéad Chathlán Coisithe. The man was a vagrant at that stage, had nowhere to go and was in a pitiful state. Mr. O'Connor made the point that the situation had probably changed now, but many members of my generation who joined the Defence Forces stayed there for their 30 years or more and were institutionalised. When it came to leaving back in the good old days, people used to be left in the barracks and no one ever took much notice, but that has all changed and it is not allowed now. Thankfully, ONE has accommodation. Regarding the resettlement programme, does Mr. O'Connor see a need for further houses in places like Galway and other parts of the country? Has he spoken to any of the housing agencies to support that?

The issue of pension abatement was referenced a few moments ago. It has been of great concern to me for a long time. The skills with which people leave the Defence Forces were mentioned. First and foremost, we are a disciplined organisation. Generally speaking, if a soldier or member of the Air Corps or Naval Service leaves the forces, a future employer can be assured that he or she will turn up at 9 a.m., deliver a full day's work and leave in the evening when he or she has to. That person will always be available if an emergency arises because that is the way we have been trained to work.

We now find that, due to slow recruitment, we need to bring back many of the skills that we lost through retirement. For example, one will find a number of former Naval Service personnel working in the Naval Service and a number of former Army personnel working in the armouries of the Curragh and various other places around the country. However, the word coming back to me is that, due to pension abatement, fewer people want to return to the public service because they can retain their pensions while holding jobs in the private sector and reaping the rewards of the service they gave to the State. I am aware that there is the likelihood of a High Court challenge because there are several examples of a pension being treated as a property right that no one can touch. Are the witnesses hearing anything from their members about how pension abatement is impacting their lives and, in particular, their career choices? If we cannot bring back armourers and Naval Service personnel because of it, we are in serious trouble. There are other ways around the problem, one of which could be a different salary scale, but pensions should never be touched.

I thank the witnesses for their time.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I wish the gentlemen a good afternoon and thank them for appearing before the committee. I also thank for them for their comprehensive opening statements, which I have read in detail. I thank them for the great service that they provided to the State when they were in uniform and the great service that they continue to provide even in retirement. It is appreciated.

I will single out the fantastic and incredible work that is being done across the country in the vaccination centres and Covid testing facilities. It is great that the Defence Forces are still in a position to contribute. From a ceremonial point of view, the splash, colour and class when Army veterans are on parade is of note, as is their charity work.

Deputy Stanton rightly pointed out that there were approximately 13,000 military pensioners. However, I suspect there are infinitely more people who left before reaching 21 or 31 years of service. Does ONE know approximately how many military veterans there are, including veterans of the Reserve Defence Force? It strikes me that the Defence Forces are Ireland's ultimate network and a professional constituency that is worthy of respect, if the witnesses understand what I am saying. How many veterans are there? They seem to be in every town and village and up every breen and byroad in the country.

My second question is for IUNVA. I noted from its opening statement that only €11,000 is provided to it every year, which is peanuts compared to the great service IUNVA provides. On what does it spend that €11,000? It has submitted a case for increasing the amount to €50,000. If the provision was increased to that amount, on what would it spend that money?

My final question is on the academic research on veteran-specific issues that ONE is requesting. Has ONE approached any third level institution's department of psychiatry, psychology, counselling or so on to see whether it would be interested in placing a postdoctoral student with, for example, ONE or IUNVA to examine or explore veteran-specific issues? If not and a third level institution was listening to the testimony this afternoon, would the witnesses welcome an approach about placing postdoctoral students with them?

Chairman: I am conscious of the time, but I will add to Senator Craughwell and Deputy Berry's questions by inviting the witnesses to comment on their expectations and hopes following their engagement with the Commission on the Defence Forces. What would they like to see contained in its recommendations that would be to their satisfaction?

I invite Mr. Brennan and Mr. Campbell to respond in whatever order they deem appropriate.

Mr. Colm Campbell: Regarding Senator Craughwell's point about recruitment, our two organisations speak at pre-retirement courses. We get access to all of them. They are on Zoom now, though, so the personal interaction with the person who is retiring is not there. Mr. O'Connor and I have attended very many such courses but, as the Senator knows, it really comes down to the business we do before and after the courses, not the talks that we give during them. I presume IUNVA feels the same that Zoom talks are not as satisfactory. That is no one's fault, though.

We would warmly welcome the Senator's veteran's lapel Bill. I can only speak for ONE and cannot be any clearer than that. We would warmly welcome it. As Mr. Brennan said earlier, It would give Government recognition to those who served. I would certainly warmly welcome it.

I refer to the office of veterans' affairs and the example of the commissioner in Northern

Ireland. The office of veterans' affairs operates in a similar manner to the Office of Emergency Planning. It works with all relevant Departments and other key public authorities, in addition to its role as listed in the briefing document, which I will not go through again. We believe it should be staffed by members of the Defence Forces and civil servants. I should probably include a senior officer and senior non-commissioned officer, NCO, from the Defence Forces and similar personnel from the Department of Defence or another civil servant. The commissioner is important in that it is a figure head that is required. I saw Danny Kinahan at services in the North during the weekend. Mr. O'Connor and I met him when he was just appointed and then we met him down here two months ago. He has six personal staff. We are not looking for anything like that. We need a basic office to start with and then let us grow it.

Institutionalisation was referred to earlier. That is exceptionally true for the older veteran. When we joined the Defence Forces, many of the people with whom we joined came from industrial schools and orphanages and literally went from one institution to another. For instance, the Defence Forces' school of music was staffed by boys from the then Artane Boys Band. One can see the impact on the older veterans who came from an institution and joined an institution. It is no surprise that they would end up with us in one of our residential homes.

The abatement issue we raised earlier. We would agree with the member in that regard. It impacts on very good people going into the public sector. As Deputy Stanton said earlier, the private sector will take them no problem so why would the public sector not take them as well? They are good, skilled people who are disciplined and turn up for work every single day. Certainly, the case-----

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Sorry to interrupt. On that point, I know some retired public servants who have through the organisations been employed to go back. They are not working for the State. They are working for the organisation.

Mr. Colm Campbell: I think that happens elsewhere.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Would ONE look at that option?

Mr. Colm Campbell: We would certainly look at it. We have not examined it - I will be honest with the Senator. Would we look at it? Yes, absolutely.

On Deputy Berry's questions, we understand that there are about 140,000 veterans in the State made up of approximately 50,000 from the permanent Defence Forces and about 90,000 from the Reserve Defence Forces. Of the 50,000 personnel from the permanent Defence Forces, fewer than 13,000 are on a pension, as Deputy Stanton said. One can take that to mean that 37,000 are not on a pension. There are about 140,000 veterans. That figure was used in the Dáil a number of years ago when Members were examining the hearing claims at the time. That is where we took the figure of 140,000 from. The Deputy's next question was for IUNVA, and was about funding in particular.

Mr. Kieran Brennan: I will continue the conversation. I refer to Senator Craughwell's comments. I concur that there are problems in the transition to civilian life. When one is not there, one does not know what impact one makes. The veterans' pension is an innovative idea and would be complementary in an holistic way to the whole process of putting in place a veterans' office and a commissioner's office.

I con cur with Mr. Campbell on the role of the commissioner. I know that-----

Chairman: We are having technical difficulties with the communication to offices. I ask the witness to hold on a moment so that we can ensure everyone is online. I see Deputy Stanton but I do not see Deputy Brady. We will take a moment to fix it. I apologise for this.

Mr. Kieran Brennan: It is your call, Chairman.

Chairman: In any event, we are approaching the time for concluding comments. Deputy Stanton can hear us. I am not sure about Senator Ardagh or Deputy Brady. We will proceed with sound only if members can hear us. Deputy Brady is back online. I ask Mr. Brennan to resume his contribution and I apologise for the interruption.

Mr. Kieran Brennan: I will be brief. My colleague, Mr. Murray, will answer the money question.

I support the idea of a veteran's pin which would be complementary to the areas for which we seek the support of this committee, in terms of an office of veteran affairs and ultimately, a commissioner for veteran affairs. I also want to acknowledge and thank Senator Craughwell's for his comments about Carlow. It is a very innovative approach. I have been at ceremonies in Carlow over a number of years where men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann have received levels 6, 7 and 8 degrees and some of them had not even completed a leaving certificate. Carlow put in place a system recognising prior learning in the Defence Forces that was complementary to the courses being pursued and our interface with Carlow allowed that to happen.

To answer the question about linking up with various multinationals like Microsoft, Intel, Vodafone and so on, there was no link-up and that was self-serving. It takes a long time and a lot of taxpayers' money to train people in the Defence Forces to the skill levels we require, particularly in respect of delivering services overseas. It is for selfish reasons that we do not get involved with them because we want to hold on to our people for as long as we can. If we were linked in with them directly, we could lose valuable people to them who would be very difficult to replace.

I concur with Mr. Campbell on the pension abatement issue and the fact that the public service is losing out on excellent people. As a former member of the Defence Forces, I want to see our highly qualified personnel staying there and delivering for the Defence Forces and the Irish population.

Deputy Berry asked whether we have linked in with third level institutions in respect of getting students. We have not done so but that is an innovative idea and is something we will consider. If the Deputy can support us in any way on that, we would be very grateful. I will ask our treasurer, Mr. Murray, to speak about money, how we spend it and how our funding comes about. He works three days per week in the Covid centre in PuncHESTOWN and has made a huge contribution over there.

Mr. John Murray: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. As UN veterans we are very grateful that our service contributed, in a small way, to Ireland achieving a seat on the UN Security Council. Deputy Berry asked about the €11,000 grant that we get from the Defence Forces. That goes out in the form of two cheques, one to our insurer and the other to our accountant. That is where that money goes. We asked that the grant be increased because Covid hit all 21 of our posts, which are countrywide and totally self-sufficient in terms of being voluntary. They depended on their bucket day collections, lottery draws and so on but all of that dried up and they were in the red and in trouble. We asked for support for them with their rent, heating,

transport and other bills. Our accountant came back to me after doing a survey of all our posts and indicated that we were down by €55,000 for last year. The sum of €50,000 will go towards paying those bills and keeping those posts afloat. To date, we have used up half of our own resources to keep those posts afloat. We are hopeful that the Department will have some good news on this. We are meeting the Minister next week and we hope that will be our Christmas present from him.

Mr. Ollie O'Connor: In response to Deputy Berry, we linked up with Queen's University in Belfast and had a couple of meetings. We found out that it would have cost us €200,000 to conduct the research. That is why it is back on the agenda with the Department. Maybe one of the universities here will do the research. It would be a great thing for a first-year PhD student to do because nobody has done it before.

We have spoken about Carlow, which is brilliant. As someone who left school after the intermediate certificate and now has a master's degree, I can say that the education I got when studying for my master's was nothing like the education I got in the Defence Forces. PDFOR-RA paid for that. One of our members, now on the board, left the Defence Forces after two years. He was a private. He now has an international public relations firm. He is providing public relations services to us at the moment on a *pro bono* basis. He has also set up a mentoring scheme under which young veterans leaving the Defence Forces would be given a mentor to show them how things work on the other side of the gate. We are only at the early stages of that scheme but hopefully it will work in some way.

Mr. Colm Campbell: A question was asked about Limerick and Galway. We are examining other opportunities, including partnerships with other approved housing bodies, AHBs. We are now an official AHB and can partner with other AHBs. We might, for instance, need a big house in Galway or Limerick with three or four bedrooms and to get that in partnership with somebody else would be fine.

Chairman: I am conscious of the time but I am also very conscious that we had a really good meeting. I thank the representatives from both organisations for attending today and for sharing with us, in a very open and frank way, many of the challenges that they face. Early intervention is vital in terms of health and welfare and in ensuring that the ongoing challenges are met. A large number of issues were raised today but before concluding, I would like to put to committee members two issues that were raised which are hugely important. The first is the early delivery of a veteran's strategy and the second is the creation of an office of veteran affairs. We may differ on the detail of what that office might be, where it might be located or how it might be resourced but it is important that this committee takes a stance on the issue on behalf of the witnesses. I ask members to endorse the writing of a letter to the Taoiseach and the Minister for Defence urging the delivery of a veterans strategy in accordance with statements made previously and the creation of an office of veteran affairs. Is that agreed? I note the agreement of Deputies Berry, Brady and Cowen and Senator Craughwell. We will write that letter as soon as possible after this meeting.

Once again, I thank the witnesses for the work that they and their volunteers do on a daily basis. It is hugely important work in terms of the service offered to the State by all of the veterans with whom they deal. I thank them for their engagement, wish them well in their endeavours and offer them the active support of this committee.

The joint committee went into private session at 4.50 p.m. and adjourned at 5 p.m. until 3 p.m. on Tuesday, 30 November 2021.