

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL, AGUS COSAINTE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE, AND DEFENCE

Déardaoin, 15 Samhain 2018

Thursday, 15 November 2018

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan,	Senator Ivana Bacik,
Deputy Noel Grealish,	Senator Gabrielle McFadden,
Deputy Niall Collins,	Senator Mark Daly.

In attendance: Deputy Jack Chambers, Deputy Clare Daly, Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Deputy Mick Wallace.

DEPUTY BRENDAN SMITH IN THE CHAIR.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senator Billy Lawless. We will now go into private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 9.32 a.m. and resumed in public session at 9.38 a.m.

Scrutiny of EU Legislative Proposals

Chairman: Before we commence the discussion with our guests, I ask members to deal with a number of EU legislative proposals that have been referred to the joint committee.

Schedule A includes COM (2018) 358. It is proposed that this proposal does not warrant further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Schedule B includes COM (2018) 463, COM (2018) 477, COM (2018) 479, COM (2018) 481, COM (2018) 485, COM (2018) 510, COM (2018) 603, COM (2018) 604, COM (2018) 669, JOIN (2018) 18, JOIN (2018) 19, JOIN (2018) 20, JOIN (2018) 21, JOIN (2018) 24 and JOIN (2018) 25. It is proposed that these proposals do not warrant further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Defence Forces: Discussion

Chairman: I ask members, delegates and those in the Visitors Gallery to ensure their mobile phones are switched off completely for the duration of the meeting, as they cause interference, even when left in silent mode, with the recording and broadcasting equipment in the committee room. The meeting is being broadcast live on Oireachtas TV and across the various media platforms.

I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or body outside the Houses, or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice that, where possible, 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.

We are meeting the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, Vice Admiral Mark Mellett; who is joined by Major General Kevin Cotter, deputy Chief of Staff; and Brigadier General Peter O'Halloran, assistant Chief of Staff. I extend a very warm welcome to all of our guests. The purpose of the meeting is allow members of the committee to discuss with the Chief of Staff matters relevant to his role and gain an insight into his priorities for the Defence Forces in the

coming years. I also welcome the other members of the Defence Forces who are with us. Céad míle fáilte rompu go léir. This is the first time the Chief of Staff has addressed a committee of the Oireachtas. As such, Dr. Mellett is most welcome. I ask him to make his presentation.

Dr. Mark Mellett: Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil libh as ucht an chuiridh a thug an coiste dom labhairt anseo inniu. I am honoured to address the joint committee and thank it for its invitation. I am joined Major General Kevin Cotter, deputy Chief of Staff, support, and Brigadier General Peter O'Halloran, assistant Chief of Staff. Major General Kieran Brennan, deputy Chief of Staff, operations, is on duty in south Lebanon and sends his regrets.

I will speak about the magnificent men and women who comprise Óglaigh na hÉireann and the importance of continuing to attract, develop, retain and, above all, value our people. I will also speak about our transformation programme and its importance in ensuring resilience in a world of ever-increasing complexity. When I close, I will be happy to take questions. I will begin by outlining some of the threats Ireland faces in the defence and security domain and how we respond to them.

The Defence Forces are a key component of the State's security architecture and part of the bedrock that underpins our sovereignty. We operate against a backdrop of a rapidly evolving security and threat environment. According to the global peace index, Ireland is in the top 5% of safest countries in the world, yet this is the fourth successive year of global peace deterioration. The new environment presents risks to national and international peace and security and includes threats posed by state and non-state actors; hybrid threats cross-cutting a number of sectors, including cyber and espionage; national and transnational violent extremism, terrorism and organised crime; and environmental factors such as climate change and global population increase. There is also the uncertainty associated with Brexit.

A key responsibility of the Defence Forces is remaining fit for purpose in the ever-changing security environment. They play their part in addressing these threats by two main means: by maintaining appropriate military capabilities and providing military advice for the Minister and the Government. To maintain appropriate military capabilities, our personnel use our unique range of assets on land, sea and air to provide the military capability to defend Ireland and its assigned interests internationally. We do this, for example, by supporting An Garda Síochána in aid to the civil power. In 2017 alone, we conducted in excess of 3,400 operations on foot of requests from An Garda. We provide specialist services such as explosive ordnance disposal, intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance, special operations forces contingent capability and engineer special search teams. We secure vital installations and provide escorts. The Naval Service and the Air Corps patrol our maritime jurisdiction which is one of the most hostile in the world. They also carry out maritime defence and security operations in an area which equates to almost three times the size of Germany, at almost 1 million sq. km, in upholding our sovereign rights, in particular in fisheries but also in countering illegal narcotics, as well as delivering specialist diving services. To date in 2018, the Air Corps has carried out over 4,500 missions, delivering emergency aeromedical support, as well as many other services such as cross-Border support in fire fighting. As one might expect, we train for these evolving threats, remaining operationally ready to deliver robust military capabilities. Our work in aid to the civil authority also helps to keep the people safe and protects their livelihoods, as we saw across the country during recent severe weather events.

Internationally, this year Ireland celebrates its 60th year of unbroken service with the United Nations in some of the most volatile areas of the world. It is an unparalleled record and a remarkable achievement for such a small state. We have completed nearly 70,000 individual

tours of duty, with 87 members of Óglaigh na hÉireann making the ultimate sacrifice. We have added to Ireland's reputation as a major contributor to international peace, security and humanitarian efforts and proved Ireland's commitment to the principles of the United Nations and the European Union and, in particular, multilateralism. Apart from delivering on Government policy and contributing to international peace and security and conflict resolution, our overseas service is vital to the maintenance of our operational capabilities in order that we are better able to perform at home in the delivery of defence, security and Government services. Our peacekeeping record is a key strand of the Government's strategy for securing a seat on the UN Security Council. Earlier this year I was pleased to attend the launch of Ireland's bid in New York. As I speak to the committee, we have a battalion operating with UNIFIL in south Lebanon, a quick reaction force operating in western Syria with the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF, and a training team operating in Mali with the EU mission. For the last three years we have had a Naval Service ship operating in the Mediterranean. In that context, it has been involved in the rescue of 18,000 civilians, including many vulnerable women and children.

The other way we play our part in addressing current threats is through the provision of military advice, which is sometimes verbal and often written. In either case, the general staff provide this advice in a professional and considered manner on foot of evidence-based analysis. I offer considered military advice on behalf of the general staff to inform ministerial and governmental decisions. Once decisions are made, we provide leadership in implementing them in full, obeying all lawful orders without fear or favour, as is our duty.

I want to say a few words about our people, of whom I am immensely proud. The Permanent Defence Force is a unique organisation and different from any other public service body. Our people have no right to join a trade union. As such, they have no right to strike and can be called on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days of the year. They are subject to military law. They have an unlimited liability contract which requires them to face hardship and danger for the benefit of others. For all of these reasons, I need to ensure our personnel are trained and developed to the highest national and international standards; that they are provided with the very best personal and professional supports, equipment and facilities; and that they are valued. They are highly skilled professionals, whether serving in line or technical appointments. Their rigorous training, education and development, unparalleled operational experience, diplomatic skills, loyalty, can-do attitude and unflinching devotion to duty are of immense value and unique strengths of the State. These outstanding qualities have made them highly sought after by employers in both the State and private sectors.

While the reinvestment of these skills back in civil society strengthens Ireland, a key challenge facing the Defence Forces is the retention of appropriate levels of highly skilled and experienced men and women, both in line and technical appointments. Similar to other areas of the public service, the process of restoring pay to the levels that obtained before the economic downturn has commenced. Although this pay restoration is welcome, we are competing in a buoyant jobs market and current rates of pay present significant challenges for our personnel and, therefore, our organisation.

The recruitment and retention challenges facing the Defence Forces were recognised in the Public Service Pay Commission's report of May 2017. Subsequently, the Government tasked the commission with examining these matters in more detail. In that context, the general staff have worked with departmental officials to prepare a joint submission to the commission. As the work of the commission is under way, it would be inappropriate to go into the detail of the

submission. However, as Chief of Staff, together with my colleagues on the general staff, I hope to have the opportunity to address the commission in the coming months. I look forward to the outcome of its work which I hope will provide the basis for addressing these matters in the Defence Forces.

On a related matter, recently the Minister published the report on the review of the conciliation and arbitration scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force. It provides a means for the determination of claims and proposals from the representative and official sides related to remuneration and conditions of service. I must commend the representative associations, the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers and the Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association, as they are essential stakeholders in the process. I also commend the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association.

All that said, there is more to retention than pay. We have been working very hard in advancing a wide range of initiatives to improve non-pay retention factors. For example, with the Department of Defence, we have been reviewing service contracts. In the new year we hope to play our part in reviewing the promotion system in co-operation with the representative associations. For our part, I have been implementing various family-friendly initiatives such as postings closer to home and three-month overseas appointments. We have also been improving internal communications, placing more emphasis on health and well-being, enhancing opportunities for the personal and professional development of our people, driving our innovation programme, including through the Chief of Staff's innovation awards, and working to embed our values in everything we do through our values champions awards and values in action programme. Notwithstanding all of these positive developments, we are still facing significant challenges. That is why we need to attract the best talent, especially when there is a buoyant jobs market in competing sectors, and nurture job satisfaction by acknowledging the quality of our personnel, the demanding nature of their roles and their unique loyalty and commitment to the State. We must ensure the Government and citizens get the best return on the significant investment the State has made in their training, education and expertise.

I will touch briefly on the issue of transformation. In order that we can develop both our capabilities and our people, we will continue to implement our strategic plans and give military advice on the allocation of defence resources. As stated in the White Paper, Ireland's investment in defence is low by international comparisons. Against the backdrop of the evolving threat environment, we will continue to make the best use of our allocated resources, for instance, through our capital investment programme. In the Army the emphasis is on force protection; in the Air Corps it is on new aircraft, and in the Naval Service, it is also on fleet replacement. One of the main ways in which we are transforming is through implementation of the policy decisions contained in the 2015 White Paper on defence. For example, we have ongoing projects that focus on the doubling of the Army Ranger wing, high level command and control of the Defence Forces, strategic human resources policies, the proposed institute for peace support and leadership, our built infrastructure, veterans, gender equality and diversity agenda and the Reserve Defence Force.

On the subject of the Reserve Defence Force, RDF, as a former reservist, I am particularly proud of the excellent contribution the force has made to Óglaigh na hÉireann for many years. In recent times it has proved its worth time and again, providing real added value in terms of manpower during Storm Emma and technical expertise in dealing with matters such as cyberdefence. Our intention is to do more to make the most of our RDF personnel who have a huge amount to contribute. To that end, I have recently appointed a director with specific responsi-

bility for the Reserve Defence Force. We are continuing to work on improving the single force framework to maximise the utility of the Reserve Defence Force, for example, through the proposed specialist reserve.

Under the leadership of the Minister of State with responsibility for defence and in keeping with my responsibility under the Defence Act and working with the Secretary General, I am absolutely committed to nurturing vibrant Defence Forces, both permanent and reserve, that will continue to meet the constitutional requirements of government and the expectations of citizens. I again acknowledge that we have been dealing with some significant challenges in recent years. During that time, there has been one constant - the absolute loyalty, dedication and professionalism of our soldiers, sailors and air crew, of whom we should all rightly be proud. They are the reason the Permanent Defence Force is one of the most trusted institutions in the public service. The certainty they have provided since independence has come within a resource envelope that represents excellent value for money for citizens. They continue to be key guarantors of the defence, security and well-being of the people and the sovereignty of the Republic of Ireland. As the world evolves, so too must we in order that we remain fit for service in the 21st century. In order that we can transform, I will continue to advocate for the need to be competitive enough to retain experienced personnel, both line and technical, and attract new entrants in order that we can guarantee defence and security services for the State and every citizen, whether it is on land, in our airspace or hundreds of miles offshore, whether it is on overseas service in conflict zones or at home, in ensuring national security and resilience. Our men and women stand ready, in the best traditions of Óglaigh na hÉireann, to “strengthen our nation by inspiring pride and leading excellence”.

I again thank the Chairman for giving me the opportunity to address the committee. I am very happy to take questions from its members.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Mellett for his detailed presentation on the work of the Permanent Defence Force, as well as the Reserve Defence Force, in addition to the challenges being faced by the organisation, to which he has brought clarity. As three committee members have other commitments in the Houses, I will take them together. I ask members to keep their questions brief in order that we can have an exchange of views with the Chief of Staff and his colleagues.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Chief of Staff and everybody else present. It is important that the Chief of Staff come before the committee again in the future as this has not happened before. It is welcome that he is visible in his role in discussing defence policy and accounting to the Oireachtas. It is about receiving feedback and playing a constructive role. Therefore, I acknowledge the Chief of Staff’s attendance and opening statement.

The Minister of State was here not too long ago to speak about the lack of recommendations made to the Public Service Pay Commission. Dr. Mellett has said he will not get into the detail of the submission made. The Minister of State indicated that the Chief of Staff had signed off on the submission to the commission. Did he do so? Was he satisfied that no recommendations had been included when a precedent had been set in making recommendations for the Air Corps only a few months previously? I have a copy of his submission in which multiple recommendations were made. Why were they dropped? Was he satisfied that the recommendations had been dropped and will he provide a justification for it?

Dr. Mellett has indicated publicly that he will try to make a plea to the Public Service Pay Commission on behalf of those working in the Defence Forces. As he mentioned, there is a massive recruitment and retention crisis. What is his plan if the commission does not respond

with adequate recommendations or a follow-through on the pay and conditions of members? What will happen in that context? Is Dr. Mellett completely satisfied with the submission made? What will happen if the commission fails to address the issues raised in it? We need clarity on whether it was signed off on. Perhaps he could provide a chronological timeline outlining his input to this joint submission detailing when it was submitted, the level of collaboration involved and why all of the recommendations on pay, allowances, superannuation and pensions were dropped even though there was a precedent for them.

I also want to ask about HR policy. Obviously there is concern about trainee and manning levels within the Defence Forces. Is Dr. Mellett satisfied with the current departmental set up, with the new assistant secretary general for people? Would he prefer a rebalancing to occur whereby he has more responsibility for HR policy and recruitment, mirroring what happens with the Garda Commissioner, for example? In that way, when pay and retention issues arise, Dr. Mellett would have a delegated responsibility for it in a policymaking context, rather than everything being funnelled back to a Department that failed to make recommendations on those matters. Will Dr. Mellett outline his thoughts on that issue?

I ask for clarity on the joint submission. What is the status of the EU working time directive *vis-à-vis* the Defence Forces and compliance with the European Court of Justice ruling? Why has there been no movement towards application of the ruling since 2010? Who is responsible for the policy deficit in that regard? Is it the Minister, the Department or the Defence Forces? I ask Dr. Mellett to outline the timeline for the implementation of the aforementioned directive in the context of numbers and capacity. Obviously it is not possible to flick a switch overnight. Dr. Mellett mentioned that the Defence Forces have introduced various family-friendly initiatives such as postings closer to home and so forth. Since the structural changes that were made to the Defence Forces a number of years ago, a lot of people are travelling from Donegal, Dundalk, Athlone and elsewhere to Dublin which is anything but family-friendly. That reinforces issues around the working time directive. Feedback from members of the Defence Forces and their representative organisations indicates that these long commutes are a source of enormous strain and are anything but family-friendly.

Dr. Mellett referred to ensuring that personnel are valued, provided with the very best personal and professional supports and are trained and developed to the highest national and international standards. That is Dr. Mellett's aspiration for the Defence Forces as well as the aspiration of his management team. However, there is a serious problem with morale, of which Dr. Mellett is obviously very aware. There are also issues with recruiting trained physicians and medical staff. Individuals have to retire because they cannot get necessary medical treatment. There is obviously a big gap there. In that context, will Dr. Mellett set out his plans to ensure that his words mean something? What will happen at departmental level in terms of his engagement on these issues? In Dr. Mellett's view, what are the key recommendations to address the recruitment and retention crisis? Does he believe that the crisis is solely down to pay and to economic and market conditions or does it run deeper than that? The University of Limerick report mentioned a review of the organisational and management structures of the Defence Forces. Is that required in the context of the deep issue of recruitment and retention?

In terms of defence spending, the Defence Forces support division submitted an analysis note on the recent budget which said that defence spending in real terms is stagnant or reducing. As Chief of Staff, how does Dr. Mellett feel about the fact that this is one of the few areas of public expenditure that is actually returning money to the State even though he is facing a recruitment and retention crisis? What is his view on the fact that the Department is beefing

itself up in terms of appointing a new assistant secretary general and increasing staffing levels generally while he is overseeing a recruitment and retention crisis and low morale? Would he like to see defence spending increasing in real terms rather than remaining stagnant or even reducing? Will he provide feedback on the aforementioned budgetary analysis? Concerns were expressed by the support division that every other Department is seeing increased expenditure except for the Department of Defence. The Department seems to be incentivised internally, at a Civil Service level, to return savings to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform despite the manpower and retention crisis in the Defence Forces. Would Dr. Mellett like to see a change there? This relates to my earlier question about HR policy and how Dr. Mellett sees his role and that of senior management going forward. Is there a need for a rebalancing in terms of his input on spending policy?

I look forward to hearing Dr. Mellett's views and thank him for appearing before the committee today.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I thank the Chairman for facilitating those of us who have other commitments this morning. I thank the Chief of Staff for appearing before the committee today and commend the great work of the Defence Forces in peacekeeping and in contributing to international peace and security through various missions, as outlined by Dr. Mellett. As a neutral country, Ireland has an important role to play on the world stage. Indeed, that neutrality is an important facet of our bid for a seat on the UN Security Council. I know that Dr. Mellett has been involved in that work. I particularly want to pay tribute to all of the Defence Forces and Naval Service personnel involved in the rescue at sea programme in the Mediterranean. Dr. Mellett outlined how many vulnerable civilians have been saved because of the work of the Irish Naval Service, among others. It is very valuable for us to hear about the diverse range of functions and roles carried out by the Defence Force personnel, and I thank Dr. Mellett for that information.

I want to focus on recruitment and retention, with a particular focus on increasing diversity within the Defence Forces. Dr. Mellett spoke about the gender equality and diversity agenda within the Defence Forces. I welcome the fact that Óglaigh na hÉireann has been a public sector leader in the practical application of policies in this area. What is the current gender balance within the Defence Forces? Dr. Mellett said that there is still some way to go, but how can the Defence Forces improve the gender balance? What sort of positive action measures are being adopted within the Defence Forces to encourage the recruitment of more women and to ensure the retention of those women who are already members of the Defence Forces? Dr. Mellett said that he has instituted family-friendly initiatives, which I welcome. However, the issue of long commutes for those serving in Ireland is of concern in that regard. Overseas postings must be a major issue for personnel with small children or with caring responsibilities, and while the reduction from six months to three months for such postings is welcome, that is still a very long time to be away from family. Does the capacity exist to shorten the length of overseas postings further? Is there any way that could be supported? Many private sector organisations in Britain have, against the backdrop of equal pay legislation, been adopting very interesting and creative recruitment initiatives to encourage more women to become pilots, for example. They have been working with the girl guides and within schools, and similar initiatives on the part of the Defence Forces would be very welcome. Inclusivity is not just a matter of gender, of course. Dr. Mellett pointed out that the Defence Forces LGBT network has been established. I believe the Defence Forces took part in the most recent Pride parade in Dublin, which is a very welcome development. What other policies are being adopted to encourage greater diversity?

I have question on the treatment of veterans, an issue that we do not often talk about in an Irish context. It is much more of an issue in countries with greater military spending. As a neutral country, it is appropriate that we do not have the level of emphasis on the military that is evident in other jurisdictions. That said, I would like to hear more from Dr. Mellett on how the Defence Forces are focusing on keeping veterans involved. It strikes me that veterans or former alumni of any organisation are very good and valuable recruiters for future generations. In terms of increasing diversity, senior women who have left the Defence Forces could play an important role in encouraging more women to join up. I just have those specific questions.

Senator Gabrielle McFadden: I thank my colleagues for allowing me to contribute now because, like Senator Bacik, I have to go to a Commencement matter debate in the Seanad. I apologise for leaving but I will come back later if the committee is still meeting. I welcome Dr. Mellett, Mr. Cotter and Mr. O'Halloran. This committee does not have oversight, as such, of the Defence Forces and the witnesses are under no obligation to come in. With that in mind, I am grateful that they have done so.

We are all aware of the issues of pay and working conditions and that it is not necessarily within the remit of the witnesses to fix it. I know from them personally that they would like to. We have no choice but to wait for the pay commission. My priority will always be proper pay for the ordinary personnel who get up early in the morning and go out to work for this State with great pride. I also feel that the measures put in place for retention will not, on their own, necessarily keep the numbers at 9,500. We have to have those retention measures and pay. I refer to duty pay, Rangers' pay and even down to rations and accommodation for recruits.

I have some questions in regard to the opening statement. I would love some more information on the development of the family-friendly measures that have been put in place. As Senator Bacik referred to, how do they include women? Can we get more women to join the Defence Forces and retain them? I would also love to know the exact number of members of the Defence Forces. In the White Paper, the figure mentioned is 9,500 but I do not know if the number is anywhere near that. I would like the witnesses to tell me that, if they can.

Are there sufficient resources for recruitment to the Defence Forces? If not, have more resources been requested and what was the reply? I know the witnesses cannot speak about the pay commission because it would not be appropriate. Similar to what Deputy Lisa Chambers said, I would like to know where we go if the pay commission does not come up with sufficient pay and conditions for Defence Forces' personnel? The restructuring of the Defence Forces and the loss of brigade status in my area was very contentious. What is the opinion of the witnesses as to how that new structure is working?

Chairman: I thank Senator McFadden. I ask Dr. Mellett, as Chief of Staff, to take the questions. If he wants to bring in his colleagues, either the Deputy Chief of Staff or the Assistant Chief of Staff, to assist with any particular issues, he should feel free to do so.

Dr. Mark Mellett: I thank the Senators and Deputies for their questions. I will start on the issue of gender diversity and inclusion. I really would like to see more women in the Defence Forces. That is not just because of our commitment under United Nations Security Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, not just to be politically correct and not just because we need access to the half of society that is female. It is a capability issue and I will come back to that point in a moment. In the context of Resolution 1325, the real tragedy in many of the areas we operate in is that sexual exploitation, abuse and gender-based violence are the main, if not the supporting, effort in many of the conflicts. The capacity for a military force to have that

institutionalised gender perspective is an essential in driving capability.

It is not an issue just in regard to getting a balance in the Defence Forces. We would be better if we had more women. I tried during my time to increase the number of women in the Defence Forces. We have moved from 6% to 7%. That might seem like a small amount of progress and I wish it was much more. I would like to get it up to between 12% and 20% of the Defence Forces. There is a tipping point where it becomes sustainable. The issue is, however, much larger than the Defence Forces. It is linked to a societal issue. I believe that young girls and boys are stereotyped at a very young age into predominantly caring kinds of roles for girls. Girls are not channelled towards science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM. I have actually used the phrase “STEM2”, that is science, technology, engineering, mathematics and military.

I would love if we could have a leadership that spoke about the opportunities in the Defence Forces for women. I have dealt with female commanders overseas. In fact, the current gender adviser to the office of the NATO Secretary General’s special representative for women, peace and security is a woman from the Defence Forces, Lieutenant Colonel Mary Carroll. I last met her in Syria on the Golan Heights where she was the unit commander. That is the type of competence we have among women in the Defence Forces. Lieutenant Colonel Carroll led that unit, predominantly male, of 130 men and women which is the fast reaction unit in that volatile area. I have seen throughout the Defence Forces, in our engineers and in many other areas, where technical competence is coming from the addition of women to the Defence Forces. It brings additionality in decision-making.

It is a capability issue and it is also an issue of diversity. I tend to separate gender from diversity inclusion simply because I see it as such a big issue in itself. Moving into the matter of diversity, from my perspective, diversity is a hedge for complexity. As we drive more and more into complexity, and the world is becoming more complex, we need to have diverse inputs into our decision-making. We need to move away from male groupthink to diverse perspectives in regard to decision-making. I and my staff are committed to increasing the number of women but I cannot do it on my own. I need support from decision-makers in the State, in schools and most of all the support of gatekeepers, the mummies and daddies, to say that a career in the Defence Forces is good for a woman.

On diversity and inclusion, similarly and on the same theme, within the Defence Forces, I and the General Staff have taken a lead on that. We need to be inclusive across the various perspectives such as gender, culture, creed and even age. I speak a different language from a millennial and he or she does not understand the language of a wrinkly old admiral. The ability to break down those barriers within an organisation is critical. I do not want stovepipes of little societies or social systems within the Defence Forces. I refer to trying to have an inclusive workplace where everybody can come to work with their whole person as opposed to the opposite. We have our inclusion and diversity strategy. We were one of the first organisations in the public sector to do that and it is working well. We are not giving up on that point and we have much more to do in that regard.

Turning back to some of the opening questions, on the issue of the Public Service Pay Commission and the submission to the commission, I have a responsibility to give advice and a perspective under section 13(3) of the Defence Act. I give my advice without fear or favour. The deliberations in regard to coming to a point of truth on the submission to the pay commission were robust, and that is to be expected. I have my own perspective, just as the Department of Defence has its perspective. I will say that we came to a point of truth and a submission was

made in early September to the pay commission. I stand full square behind that submission.

The submission has gone to the pay commission and it is considering it. In due course, the pay commission will make a decision on recommendations to Government. When the Government makes its decision on foot of those recommendations, then we are in a new point in time. If necessary, I will give further advice, depending on the outcome. I do not see it just stopping with the decision of Government. I see my job, in terms of leadership, to implement that decision, but it may require that I continue to give further advice to Government in the context of what I have to deal with in the Defence Forces.

There is no doubt that I see the challenge of pay as a key issue. I am not, however, just looking at pay. There are other areas where I also have responsibility and I am absolutely committed to those. We spoke about work-life balance and the requirement of the organisation itself to be family-friendly. I have tried to do that with the introduction of hot desks and in spouse and partner balancing in how we govern overseas service. On the issue of three months versus six months, I would love if we could reduce it below three months but there is a practical point. I refer to continuity and experience in service whereby it becomes disruptive, certainly in the international domain, when an individual would come into an appointment for a shorter period than three months. There is a requirement for acclimatisation, the development of relationships with work colleagues and the delivery of service.

I am trying to be constructive in respect of the requirement to meet the needs of the individual. At the same time, we have to ensure that the outputs are fit for purpose. I feel that three months is probably the optimal in the context of family-friendly overseas appointments. Also with regard to family-friendly appointments, I am trying, where possible, to ensure postings are closer to the family home so we can reduce commuting distances. That is not always possible but, on balance, we endeavour to achieve that. With regard to disturbance, if somebody is posted to an area away from the home there are supports available and the family can be moved, if necessary. That is an option an individual can take.

On dealing with personnel and the climate survey, we have moved to increase the age of our privates and senior NCOs at sergeant level and our corporals in order that they can serve overseas until they are 55. That has been introduced. It increases the pool. Previously, these NCOs used to be able to serve until 50. We are also moving on areas such as promotion, which is critical. In the past year, we have had about 749 promotions. The system is not as efficient as I would like. It causes long delays in terms of the placement of individuals in gaps. That is a problem for two reasons. First, it means an individual in the organisation is not getting paid at a rate he or she should be. Second, there is a gap in the organisation where an individual should be able to function at senior NCO level. That is why, in 2019, I hope for an expeditious outcome on the promotion competition, through engaging with the Department and representative bodies.

With regard to retention, it is a question of trying to return to some of the principles that underpinned the Defence Forces in the past. One involves re-institutionalising the importance of sport and team activity. We have become really focused on outputs but have forgotten some of the institutions that really support them. One is the tradition of sport in terms of team effort and building a community within the Defence Forces rather than obsessing over outputs. In the long run, I am convinced that returning to greater cohesion on the sport side will enhance our resilience in terms of the outputs.

This feeds into another major concern I have. It is a general concern and not just about the

Defence Forces. It pertains to well-being. The greatest challenge facing complex organisations is that of stress. We feel it individually and as communities, and we feel it in organisations such as ours. Therefore, trying to find a means whereby we can institutionalise well-being within the Defence Forces is good for a variety of reasons. First, it means a soldier has greater resilience in facing some of his or her challenges, making him or her less likely to be stressed in dealing with them. Second, it gives me a more resilient organisation to meet the expectations of the Government and the citizen.

As for development, a question was asked by Deputy Jack Chambers on education. It is one of the key points on which I am focused. Currently in the Defence Forces there is a system whereby every junior NCO can go to level 6 and every senior NCO can go to degree level. We have degree-level programmes for officers and programmes up to master's level. I am even committed to trying to institutionalise, where possible, work-based learning leading to professional PhDs in order that people can learn in the workplace. This is a remarkable achievement. Last week, I attended an event in the Institute of Technology, Carlow at which 209 members of the Defence Forces were given awards, from master's level downwards. It was great to see. Some of the young men and women did not have a leaving certificate when they joined the Defence Forces. We brought them from the point of having none to having one. With brought them to a point where they received accreditation and work-based learning, working with the Institute of Technology, Carlow. Some of them have graduated with a master's degree.

On the issue of the soldier, sailor and aircrew of the future, it is not just about being a warrior in terms of professional skills; it is also about being a scholar in order that one can have perspective on a broader world, such that one can actually think as well as deliver. The third aspect concerns diplomacy. It is a matter of trying to nurture the skills in the context of one's ability to work with others. Increasingly, the challenges we face have answers that lie outside our organisational boundaries. It is a matter of trying to create an organisation that has the ability to recognise it is part of a broader community in terms of solving problems. That means being able to network externally. Although I spoke about internal diversity earlier, I regard the Defence Forces as part of a system of external diversity in terms of dealing with the higher educational institutes and bodies and other aspects of civil society.

With regard to the University of Limerick recommendations, I have an action plan called the climate survey action plan. It contains approximately 54 items. I have made progress on 20 of those, for which I am responsible, in the Defence Forces. Twelve have been closed. I am still working on a number of others. There are areas with regard to contracts on which I am working with the Department. I am absolutely committed to moving on that.

The issue of pay has arisen in terms of the climate survey, focus groups and employee engagement surveys. It arises in town hall meetings when I meet the men and women of the Defence Forces. Sometimes when one is faced with a young soldier who has a dependant or partner and he says to me on a Sunday it is costing him to deliver a 24-hour service, it is a challenge, especially when he reaches a point where he nearly breaks down in front of his peers. Therefore, there is concern over pay. I am not obsessed on the pay side but I am saying there is an issue I have to address. That is why I made an appeal to address the Public Service Pay Commission. I hope to do that. I am delighted the Minister of State was able to prioritise the Defence Forces in respect of the work of the commission. With regard to the outcome in terms of the recommendation to the Government, a point will ultimately be reached at which the latter will make a decision. As Clausewitz said, there can be no way other than subordinating the military to the political. I said in my opening statement that I will give the leadership to imple-

ment the decision of the Government but if there is a need for me to give further advice, I will do so at that time.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I mentioned that the support division produced an analysis of the recent budget. The Chief of Staff's support division delivered an analysis of the recent budget in which it outlined the defence spending in real time is stagnant or reducing, and that it represents the only area of the public service that is making a contribution back to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Considering the retention and recruitment crisis and serious issues over personnel, manpower and capacity, naval ships being docked, having to outsource part of the Air Corps and an element of contagion regarding some of the core capabilities, how does the Chief of Staff feel about giving back money to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform? This is based on analysis from the Chief of Staff's own division. What is his view on the recent budget? Does he accept his own support division's analysis that defence expenditure is stagnant or reducing? Would he like to see a change of course in that regard?

On the question on HR policy, would the Chief of Staff prefer to have a greater role regarding the governance construct? People looking from the outside note the beefing up of the input of the Civil Service, including the Department. The Chief of Staff has made a public plea over pay. He is saying he has given military advice and will give further military advice if the commission does not deliver. If he was fully satisfied with the joint submission that was made, could he not have said he stood fully behind it? Why does he have to engage with the pay commission if the submission made by the Department was adequate? Could he not have referred to that?

The Minister of State said on record at a meeting of this committee that no recommendations were made but that the submission the Chief of Staff gave to the Department had multiple recommendations. Was he satisfied that no recommendations were made and that the Department submitted purely data-based analysis? Those are my two or three questions. I asked another question on the working time directive.

Dr. Mark Mellett: On the matter of defence spending, it is not in my area of competence. I am not the Accounting Officer. There was a White Paper process in 2015 in which this was dealt with in detail. It set out the governance arrangements within the defence organisation. In fairness to the Secretary General, I would not like to be reflecting on his part of the ship. What I can say is that I have never met a Chief of Staff who could not make a case for more resources. From having mixed with my colleagues in Europe, I am aware they will always be able to make a case for more resources. However, my priority is to ensure the resources allocated are used in a manner that achieves value for money and maximises the capability we develop with them. In recent years, I am satisfied that, at the end of the year, the resources that have been allocated have been exploited to the fullest. I will continue to support and ensure we have projects related to our capabilities, which are identified in the White Paper, that are prioritised in terms of a timeline and can be delivered within the accounting year with a view to expenditure of the funds.

Governance within the Department of Defence is a matter for Government and how the Minister allocates between the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces. I am quite happy, if required, to make recommendations to the Minister of State and I do that. It is my responsibility to give the Minister advice on aspects that I feel the Defence Forces can be more streamlined in their capacity to work within the defence organisation. I have done that verbally and I will continue to do it in the future.

On the submission to the public sector, my point is that I am standing behind a submission that is made. It provides the basis for an engagement with the Public Service Pay Commission. I now have a responsibility to seek further opportunities in terms of advocacy to give the narrative from my perspective.

The Defence Forces are unique institutions, they are not like other parts of the public sector. Our members are subject to military law. They will not, and cannot, join a union. They will not strike. They will be subject to unlimited liability and that is the very reason I remember, during Storm Emma recently, that when the instruction from Government was that all personnel were to be off the streets by 4 p.m. on that particular day, the people who were out operating and supporting other primary response agencies were the Defence Forces. They were bringing patients for dialysis, they were working with the ESB and towing ESB vehicles to transformers to keep power going. The ability of the Defence Forces, across the spread, was remarkable. The ability to do this is often honed in very challenging environments overseas. This is the proof of the capabilities that we develop working with others internationally being brought to bear domestically when there is a time of crisis relating to, in that case, a climate event.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I asked about the working time directive.

Dr. Mark Mellett: We have had a working group on the working time directive for some time now. I see three strands to that. First, it is being true to the legislative requirements. The legislation has not been transposed into Irish legislation yet, but the Department is working on bringing to a point of truth the necessary derogations for the Defence Forces so that we can continue to deliver our outputs while being true to the spirit of the legislation and, at the same time, being fair to the individual members of the Defence Forces and ensuring the organisation can continue to function and meet the requirements of Government and citizens.

We are not an ordinary organisation so there are going to be aspects whereby a derogation there will be required. That is a policy matter that the Department of Defence is addressing. We have one working group in terms of identifying what the implications are and, I can assure the committee, we will be fair to the individuals within the Defence Forces. I want to expedite the institutionalising of the working time directive as soon as possible.

Chairman: The next grouping is Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Noel Grealish and Clare Daly.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus cosúil leis na daoine eile, fáiltím roimh an triúr de na haíonna agus go háirithe mar gur deis mhaith é seo ceisteanna a chur orthu faoi gur ghlac siad an cuireadh teacht os ár gcomhair agus mo gabhaim buíochas libh as sin. Tá sé ceart go bhfuil guth na bhFórsaí Cosanta le cloisteáil anseo seachas go dtí seo gur trí prism nó filter an Aire nó na Roinne a tharla sé sin roimhe seo.

The Defence Forces are facing major challenges, and I have raised some here and I have been very critical on some issues and hopefully it is never taken as a personal issue because, like everybody else here, I have the health and safety of officers and the best interests of the men and women of the Defence Forces in mind.

In general, a number of issues seem to have happened in the recent past which suggest that morale is down, people are being overstretched and mistakes are happening. Is it just because of the failure to reach the complement of 9,500? Is it pay and conditions, that members feel that they are not appreciated in terms of pay? For instance, one of the big criticisms of the paper in

September was to do with Defence Forces members in the Phoenix Park being on duty for 24 or 48 hours, and members of An Garda Síochána the same, but a total difference between them.

The Chief of Staff is right to say it is not an ordinary organisation and when people sign up they have some understanding of what they are signing up for, but, in doing so, an organisation and its members have to be appreciated and compensated somewhat. Does he believe that the other parts of the public service, and the public in general, understand fully the differences and how much the members of the Defence Forces rely on allowances to fill the gap in terms of pay and conditions?

We recently had a respect and loyalty march in the city. It was not a strike because members of the Defence Forces were not on strike, but it was those who were supportive and sympathetic and who felt that their concerns, which I have raised through their representative organisations internally, and through parliamentary questions and so on, were not being listened to. There is a whole list of issues that I know the Defence Forces probably have. Most of them were to do with pay and conditions. I understand the pay issue, as the Chief of Staff said at the outset, is being dealt with. Others can be dealt with, and the working time directive was mentioned, and hopefully the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, conference at the end of the month will look at that. They are bringing in some experts that will add to the Defence Forces' understanding or planning in that relationship.

There are other issues, for instance, moving the upper service limit of 21 years and the age at which somebody can join the Defence Forces. For instance, there are people of an age who have the fitness and wherewithal to join the Defence Forces and who can join other defence forces. A woman I dealt with, who was a top athlete, could not join the Irish Defence Forces because she was three or six months too old - I cannot remember exactly - but she could have joined the British defence forces. That is something small that can be tweaked. Society has changed. We are living longer, we are fitter and more capable in later years of doing work that would not have been expected of us in the past in military circles. The upper age limit and retirement age limit are issues. Is that reflected in the conversations the Chief of Staff would have, for instance, with his members?

I have been very critical about health and safety, and I know major changes have been made in the past number of years. Dr. Mellett has probably been plagued with quite a number of questions about the chemical exposure over the years of men and women - men in particular, but men and women - in the Air Corps. A lot has been done and praise should be given for the movement that has eventually been made towards a proper regime. What can be done for those who have major health problems which they relate to their times in the Defence Forces? It is not just to do with Baldonnel Aerodrome. I have also raised it in terms of those who suspect that their major health complications are related to the likes of Lariam in particular. Have the Defence Forces looked at how other countries' defence forces have dealt with very similar problems? Have the Defence Forces been liaising with the Department of Health on whether members can be given additional supports after they leave the Defence Forces to help them identify what is wrong with them and to address the identified problems? I will leave it at that and come back if need be.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I join my colleagues in welcoming the Chief of Staff along with his colleagues, the deputy chief of Staff and assistant chief of staff. This is the first time they have appeared before us and perhaps it will be the first of many appearances.

We have all read newspaper reports in recent months and years indicating that morale in the

Defence Forces is low. We do not like reading those reports. The Defence Forces are people we look to during a time of crisis, particularly during flooding. We could go into all the cases we have experienced personally. As the Chief of Staff said, when everybody was off the streets during the recent storm the military personnel were out. I am delighted that in his opening statement he said how proud he was of his men and their commitment to the State. All of us are proud of the military and we know the commitment its members have to securing the State.

I know the Chief of Staff does not like talking about pay and conditions all the time. We do not like reading about it in the papers. Nobody wanted to march with military personnel, especially retired personnel who marched in support of their serving colleagues. I acknowledge that the Chief of Staff will go before the Public Service Pay Commission to address that issue. It is the first time somebody has given a serious commitment to try to address it. I hope he gets the full support of the Department on this matter. He will certainly have the full support of the Oireachtas.

In regard to pay and conditions, what comparison with An Garda Síochána has the Defence Forces carried out? Some people mentioned the Pope's recent visit. I will not rehash the point, but we read reports on what the military personnel earned that day. One Garda member told me the overtime he made that weekend paid for his skiing holiday. I know damn well that what the military walked away with would not pay for a meal, never mind a skiing holiday. Has the Chief of Staff made comparisons between what are practically the same ranks? Has the pay of a Defence Forces recruit been compared with the pay of a new recruit to the Garda Síochána as they move up the ladder and pay scale? Deputy Ó Snodaigh mentioned other militaries. Have the Defence Forces engaged with the British, French or other armies around Europe on how they pay their staff? If such a comparison has been made, the Chief of Staff might outline it for us. It is an issue that has to be addressed.

On recruitment and retention, what can be done to keep personnel in the Defence Forces? The strongest impression I get when meeting young military personnel is that they are leaving to join An Garda Síochána. I met a young lad last week who was disappointed that he had not passed the first exam for An Garda Síochána but he planned to try again. That is a big issue. It will be difficult to recruit people into the military in years to come. We have to put in place a proper system to attract and retain people in the military. I would like to know whether the Defence Forces have looked at what other armies around Europe have done to retain their officers. I understand the Air Corps can no longer fly at night because it does not have sufficient personnel. Organ donor transport used to be provided by the military. I remember ringing Baldonnell Aerodrome in 2003 or 2004 when a young person was in a serious accident in Spain and had no insurance. The military was able to send the Government jet out to bring that person home. That was a tremendous service. Air Corps pilots are required to fly a certain number of hours. Does the Defence Forces have the manpower to provide this service now?

I understand that the 2015 adjudication on post-1994 personnel is scheduled to expire at the end of 2020. This will see the compulsory discharge of significant numbers of personnel from the Defence Forces. What impact is the current delay in notifying personnel of their future employment within the Defence Forces having? Will allowing personnel to serve up to the age of 50 have an adverse impact on the Defence Forces?

PDFORRA participated in an adjudication hearing in 2015 in which the adjudicator recommended allowing personnel of tech 1 grade and above and corporals to remain in service for five years. This recommendation is scheduled to run out at the end of 2020. Significant numbers of enlisted personnel are to be discharged at the beginning of 2021. What impact will that

have on the Defence Forces?

The Chief of Staff might not be able to comment on this, but I read in the papers recently that there has been a major breakdown in trust between the Department and the Defence Forces. I remember a former brigadier wrote an article in-----

Chairman: The Deputy cannot quote newspapers.

Deputy Noel Grealish: It was an article carried by the papers. I do not know if the Chief of Staff wants to make any comment on that. I knew Lieutenant Colonel Mary Carroll. She was in Dún Uí Mhaoilíosa. She is a great lady and I am delighted to hear the Chief of Staff met her when she was in Syria. I acknowledge again the tremendous work the Chief of Staff is doing to address the issues within the Defence Forces, and I wish him luck in that. We will all support his efforts.

Chairman: Does Deputy Daly wish to ask a question?

Deputy Clare Daly: I have a parliamentary question due for discussion in the Dáil so I am watching the clock. I will have to leave but I will be back. Senator Daly may wish to contribute.

(Interruptions).

Senator Mark Daly: As a former member of the Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil, FCÁ, I am fiercely proud of my badge. My services were never called upon, thankfully. The one admission I will make to the Chief of Staff is that the boots were used for a lot of farming down in Kerry. If there are any recriminations, I am willing to face disciplinary hearings, of which I had a number recently.

I pay tribute to the Defence Forces. I am a member of Oireachtas all-party consultation group on commemorations for the decade of centenaries. The Defence Forces played a major role in preparation for that. I also want to highlight the role of the Defence Forces in visiting schools to present the flag to a generation that now understands its true meaning of peace between communities. This is a very important part of the decade of centenaries.

To address the business end of the Army, while I know the Chief of Staff may not wish to comment on political decisions, I will raise the proposals made by Germany and Europe since we joined the permanent structured co-operation, PESCO. The Germans and French have been looking for an EU army forever and a day. The issue of neutrality is one that concerns many citizens. The Defence Forces, like all Departments and all branches of the Government and State, put forward proposals regarding the consequences of Brexit. The position regarding the Border changes by the hour depending on what news bulletin one watches. Last night, there was great hope. With this morning's resignation from the British Cabinet, it looks like the proposed deal may not stick. The Defence Forces put forward proposals on the preparedness for and possible outcomes of Brexit, its long-term consequences and the possibility of the return of a hard border. The lesson of Brexit is that those in power should not hold a referendum and then tell everybody what the future will be like. That is the worst of bad planning. Britain is now suffering the consequences of not having a truthful engagement about the real outcomes of Brexit. I suggest, as I have done on many previous occasions, that a Border poll here is the last thing we should do as one of the possible outcomes of Brexit. Theresa May has said it. Lady Sylvia Hermon, who is the unionist MP for North Down, has said she believes there will

be a referendum in her lifetime. I have met some former members of the Defence Forces who have said they believe there will be a united Ireland in their lifetimes. My concern is that a hard border and a hard Brexit will accelerate that. As I have said, a referendum or Border poll is the last thing we need. All of the engagement and discussion-----

Chairman: The Senator is straying somewhat from the focus of our discussion.

Senator Mark Daly: The point I am making is that there are people who do not want a referendum as an outcome of all of this. I am sure a plan is being put in place for this scenario. I apologise for not being here when my colleagues asked questions about bread and butter issues like terms and conditions. Some of the concerns about the establishment of an EU army and the benefits of being in EU operations relate to the preparedness of the Defence Forces and the implications for our service at UN level. The long-term issue is the belief that there will be a referendum. Those are not my words but those of people in the unionist community. I would like to hear the witnesses' views on the possible outcomes of that.

Chairman: I call Dr. Mellett in response to those questions which are appropriate to be answered.

Dr. Mark Mellett: Go raibh maith ag an Teachta Ó Snodaigh. He asked whether we are understood or appreciated by society. I want to commend the committee on visiting our installations. I understand some members are due to go overseas in the near future. That kind of engagement is good for the Defence Forces because it means there is political understanding of the Defence Forces. The experiences of politicians who come to see what the Defence Forces are doing allow society to have a window into our operations. That is the best way to expose the Defence Forces as a constituency. There was a time in the past when I used to compare the Defence Forces to a walled garden. We were quite happy to live behind a wall and do great stuff there like a self-licking ice cream. Things have changed now. We are completely open and transparent. We are trying to be much more engaged with other institutions, including various parts of the State, areas of government, the higher education institutions and parts of civil society. We are broadening our ability to recognise the point that none of us has all the answers. Neither the Defence Forces nor any other institution of the State has all the answers. We need to collaborate with others at national level and, in a broader sense, work with others as part of a greater multilateralism.

I will respond to the Deputy's specific point about whether the Defence Forces should expand to take in more personnel. He asked questions in this context about terms and conditions, length of service and the upper age limit. I am completely open at all times to examining every opportunity to maximise the number of recruits who come into the organisation and to be agile and flexible in retaining those who are already in service. I would love to expedite the issue of the terms and conditions of those who are currently in service so that they can get clarity on their contracts. This exact point is being examined as part of a project under the White Paper on Defence. I wish we could move on it more quickly. I am putting on the pressure to ensure this happens. Like the Deputy, I meet soldiers, sailors and air crew who are looking for clarity. If an outcome is not reached soon, decisions that are not entirely in the interests of the Defence Forces could be made. This would be a pity.

The other point I would like to make in this context is that Defence Forces personnel bring huge talent with them wherever they go. It has been mentioned that members of the Defence Forces are leaving to join other institutions in parts of the public service, including the Garda. The strength, wealth and level of development they bring with them in such circumstances is

being retained within the State. When we analyse these matters, we see that many Defence Forces personnel leave to go to other parts of the public sector. This is a reflection of their attractiveness and of the reality that they are being rewarded for going into those positions.

It is important for me to deal with the issue of health and safety. In our business, it is critical to have safe operations. It goes to the heart of an organisation like the Defence Forces, which has to put people into harm's way. We have people who go into harm's way almost every day. I have led on the issue of transparency. When things happen within the organisation, there is a no-blame culture where possible. Now and then, people have violations and have to be called to order. The point is to learn lessons from the mistakes that happen. If there is transparency, the lessons that are learned will be communicated as quickly as possible to other parts of the Defence Forces where there is a need for knowledge with regard to changes in governance systems.

We have a serious accident investigation team that stands ready at all times. It has been deployed three times so far this year. It delivers a report to me as soon as possible to set out the wayouts in the context of the incident in question and to spell out what we need to put in place right away to mitigate the incident and to ensure it is not replicated. More broadly, we have a general routine order - I think it is No. 5 of 15 - that sets out the safety management system within the Defence Forces. This is necessary under national legislation. We are not rogue in the sense that we are not operating outside of our requirements under the law. We are institutionalising that law into the procedures of the Defence Forces itself. We have a risk management system and a risk assessment system. We have a system for the reporting of accidents. I suppose we have a truth culture which means that our focus is on trying to learn from every incident that happens. There can be no other way.

I remember being laughed at when I was a young sailor because I identified a problem on my ship. I immediately sent a signal to all of the other ships. My command at that time said I was foolish to expose our dirty linen in public. I still hold the principle I held that day. I am glad to see that it has been institutionalised within the Defence Forces. A mistake is acknowledged with a view to ensuring we can mitigate the effects of the immediate state while minimising the risk of it happening again. Our safety statements are reviewed continually. The Defence Forces also have health and safety plans. All of this does not sit in isolation from other parts of governance.

The issue of well-being arises in this context. I am committed to ensuring there are institutions within the Defence Forces that are promoting well-being in a general sense. This is necessary to ensure not only that people feel the workplace is safe, but also that they have a genuine desire to have their physical and mental health looked after. I acknowledge that stress is a big challenge. It is often driven by many factors, including domestic factors. I have reached out to families through our personal support services because the support base that enables men and women to operate within the Defence Forces and to give loyalty to the State is very much built on the domestic support they receive from their partners, their friends and the society around them. I have to be conscious that we are not just talking about the men and women who come through the gate into the barracks. We are also talking about the critical support base that is provided by wives, partners, husbands, parents and children. In that context, we will open a page that is specifically linked to families in the very near future. We also have a 24 hour care call system. Family members can phone into the care call line if they have an issue relating to stress. We are endeavouring to have family outreach, in as much as we can, involving members of the Defence Forces.

The Deputy raised an issue with regard to the Phoenix Park. Many soldiers in the Defence Forces felt that some of the populism associated with some of the imagery around that time was not appropriate. I was there. I saw the professionalism of the soldiers. When we go into very rough places, we lay down and operate from there. We put up our bivouacs and operate in very challenging environments, where we are not worried about syringes but about snakes or scorpions. A populist movement was driven by some imagery. I do not know where it came from.

The same point can be made about the food. It was not fair to the chefs of the Defence Forces that it was conveyed that the food was not fit for purpose. I saw the food. It was outstanding. I invite the Deputy to come to visit some time.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have done so.

Dr. Mark Mellett: The Defence Forces are well fed. I am delighted that all of our chefs are certified to a level that, unfortunately, makes them attractive to other parts of society, particularly the tourism industry.

I have been asked whether I am listening with regard to morale. I do not think there has been any Chief of Staff, or anyone among the general staff, who has spent more time visiting barracks, attending town hall meetings and putting himself or herself in front of troops. That is the way I ground truth - the sense of value in the men and women of the Defence Forces. I also see it as my responsibility to allow employees to have a voice. This ensures people can express their point of view and speak to the Chief of Staff. I do so in a manner that aims to promote a culture in which nobody feels inhibited in expressing a point of view. It is working quite well. I have set in place a sergeant majors' forum for all our key senior NCOs. I try to meet it every six months and take on board its recommendations on how we can better meet the requirements of young soldiers, sailors and aircrew within the organisation. We have an internal intranet which allows us to have discussions on a raft of issues.

One of the key developments in recent times has been the value awards. The Defence Forces have a set of values which have defined it as an institution since the foundation of the State. They are moral courage, physical courage, respect, integrity, loyalty and selflessness. It is critical that these are institutionalised within the Defence Forces. One of my happiest times in recent years was giving the awards to the value champions in the Defence Forces. These are individuals selected by their peers as best representing each of those values. I recall ringing a young private to give her the news that she was the recipient of the selflessness award. She was crying on the phone. After a while, she said surely somebody else in the Defence Forces deserved the award more than her. That epitomises the values in the Defence Forces. She was nominated by dozens of her peers, a selfless operator in the Defence Forces who epitomised that value.

I am constantly endeavouring to raise morale levels. There are challenges but I am not sitting on my hands in terms of addressing those. Internationally, we have looked at pay in other defence institutions in the UK and the US. I have dealt with the Australian and New Zealand chiefs of defence to get a sense of what mechanisms they have to deal with the issue of pay and conditions. It is not appropriate for me to compare us with other parts of the public sector. That is a matter for the Public Service Pay Commission. I am sure it will look at that in the round. It is an open book and this is a democracy. One can go to the Central Statistics Office website to see a comparator across the average weekly earnings of all parts of the public sector. One will see the Defence Forces is consistently the lowest paid group in the public sector. That is against the fact that we do not have protections. Our personnel are subject to an unlimited li-

ability and to military law, meaning they will not strike. I feel there is a platform in the Public Service Pay Commission which will allow me acknowledge my desire to protect what is critical in the context of the institution of Óglaigh na hÉireann. There is a loyalty we have delivered since the foundation of the State and we will continue to do so. I will give leadership on that side. I am accepting there is a leadership issue here and I and the general staff will provide that leadership. There are areas in which I believe I could be even more able in the context of meeting the requirements of the Government and society. Pay is one of the issues on which I will certainly continue to advocate. I have done so to the Minister of State, as he has acknowledged in the Dáil. In fairness, the Minister of State has ensured the Public Service Pay Commission has prioritised the Defence Forces as one area to be examined.

I am delighted Senator Mark Daly served with the Reserve Defence Forces. It has made some fine men in the State. It is a powerful institution and has given us significant agility today, and even more so in the future in terms of some of the projects in the White Paper on Defence.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment on Brexit. The Senator can be assured that the prudent planning required is being carried out. One would expect no less. The EU army is in the policy space and I cannot comment on it. Suffice to say, there is the triple lock with a requirement of a decision from the Cabinet and the Oireachtas, as well as a UN mandate. That remains in place to ensure the Defence Forces remain within the institutions that the sovereign State decides are fit and appropriate for a democracy.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am not one of those who commented on the photographs from the Phoenix Park, no more so than some of the photographs circulated regarding the delay in getting troops back from the Golan Heights. Some of that commentary was intended for wrong purposes. I usually try to check the facts. The reason I mentioned the Phoenix Park was because it showed many people the differences in remuneration for two arms of the State. Gardaí can get overtime while members of the Defence Forces get day allowances. One can understand how members of the Defence Forces and their families feel let down and less appreciated. It was more to get across to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Public Service Pay Commission that the Defence Forces are different from any other sector of the public service. If they can understand that, whatever system they put in place to reward 24-hour duty or longer will be appreciated. Without that, morale will stay low and the forces will continue to haemorrhage personnel. The fact that members of the Defence Forces are leaving to go to another arm of the State shows they can get better money elsewhere in the public service. I accept not everybody leaves for that reason.

The new naval ships bring their own challenges because they have to be crewed. We recently heard of crews not being available for ships leaving for duties in the Mediterranean. When the final ship is due, will the Naval Service have the complement required to fulfil its commitments? The Chief of Staff mentioned maritime defence and security and the fact that the Naval Service is patrolling an area three times the size of Germany. Our navy is much smaller than Germany's which has a smaller area to patrol.

On Brexit, I presume the Defence Forces, like every organisation, is engaging in some planning in the background.

Many people take significant pride in the work done by the Defence Forces overseas, in particular with UNIFIL, Operation Pontus and Operation Sophia. Recently, when the *LÉ James Joyce* returned to Ireland, it was commented that it was not involved in as many rescues on this occasion. We did not hear fully from the Defence Forces on how it got on in the past. Hope-

fully, it played as large a role as previous naval ships did in previous missions. Irish people were in general happy with what happened in past missions.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will come in. I think Deputy Clare Daly wants to come in as well.

Chairman: Go ahead now.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Does the other Deputy want to go ahead?

Chairman: Deputy Chambers is forgoing his turn.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Yes.

Chairman: Deputy Grealish?

Deputy Noel Grealish: Very briefly, I asked the Chief of Staff about curtailing air traffic control to daylight hours, whether there is a major shortage of staff within the Air Corps and whether it is eliminating the service of the Air Corps.

I also asked about staff who had to remain in service for five years. I do not think I got a reply to that.

What control has Dr. Mellett over the budget? If equipment needs to be bought for the Defence Forces, does he have to apply to the Department to secure funding to spend? Does he have to make a recommendation to the Department? Would he like to be the Accounting Officer like the Garda Commissioner who has full control over the budget for An Garda Síochána?

Chairman: The Oireachtas will decide that.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I know, but the Chief of Staff might give his view.

Deputy Clare Daly: I am sorry about this but I have a parliamentary question in the Chamber. I have arranged with the Ceann Comhairle for it to be taken later, but some of my questions need an answer and the next question depends on that answer. Can we have a bit of a to and fro?

Chairman: Yes, but not for too long.

Deputy Clare Daly: I do not want to repeat points made by others, but we can do the easy one, in some ways, first. Dr. Mellett has given a long account of the external factors that restrict the ability to entice enough women into the Defence Forces. I am more concerned about what is done with them when they get in, and improvements that could be made in areas under his control.

The first issue on that is about the Naval Service. Women joined the Naval Service in 1995. There is not a single female officer of command or rank, with the word being that they get a bit sidelined when they have children. No female NCO has broken through the glass ceiling of chief petty officer. I suppose my first question is what Dr. Mellett is doing to push for the promotion of more women to top ranks - not just in the Naval Service, but across the Defence Forces - and why is the record of promotion so poor? What systems are in place for women with children? Dr. Mellett might also deal with whether he has heard of any instances of women being penalised, bullied or pushed out, whatever way one wants to put it, for having children, in essence, or is that something he can say with confidence does not happen?

Dr. Mark Mellett: I think I made the point clearly that I want to see more women in the Defence Forces. I am disappointed we do not have more women at senior rank in all three services.

The promotion system is part of a conciliation and arbitration outcome between representation, military management and the Department. The critical point, I would say, is that right now in the operational headquarters of Operation Sophia in the Mediterranean, there is a female lieutenant commander, one of the naval officers, who previously commanded a number of ships. In my time in the navy, a quarter of our ships were commanded by female captains.

I have read and contributed to research endeavouring to address the issue of gender inequality within the Naval Service, in particular, and I have seen some of the findings and they give me cause for reflection. I have doubled my efforts on trying to take out some of the impediments to development within the Defence Forces. One of them is modularisation of our long career courses. The command and staff course is about nine months long and I have tried to break that into modules to make it more family friendly. That will particularly apply to women members of the Defence Forces, but it is obviously open to male members.

I think there are challenges in terms of nurturing within the Defence Forces and the separation that goes with parenting, particular for women members. Areas such as breastfeeding and young childcare are a challenge to us and I would love to see more initiatives like a crèche. I have tried to drive that on a number of occasions and have come up against impediments in trying to establish a crèche within the Defence Forces.

With regard to normalisation, where we have two serving family members, I want to introduce a means whereby certain freedoms are brought in. If members serves overseas, they will have periods of exemption from duties to encourage them and make it easier for them to serve overseas without being penalised with regards to routine domestically when they come home.

I would love to see female chief petty officers and warrant officers in the naval service. It is not a question of a glass ceiling. It is critical for equality, as I said earlier, that we have that decision making input at the more senior ranks, in the non-commissioned ranks as well as senior officers within the Naval Service.

To reassure Deputy Clare Daly, I will continue to give leadership to have equal opportunities for women within the Defence Forces.

Regarding people being forced out of the Defence Forces, I take any issues regarding administrative instruction A7 very seriously. That is a provision relating to harassment within the Defence Forces. I continually monitor that, as well as any evidence of bullying and harassment within the Defence Forces. There are regular briefings on that and there is an openness. I mentioned the issue of town halls earlier, when Deputy Clare Daly was not here, at which I try and push the importance of institutionalising a gender perspective, the appointment of a gender adviser, the appointment of gender focal points and the creation of a woman's forum in the various units to try and ensure moving on that path towards a gender perspective being institutionalised. Gender inequality is not just an issue for women, it is an issue for men. In an organisation that is predominantly male, I want to address that.

Deputy Clare Daly: I was really short in my questions, and I have a lot of them. I would appreciate if the Chief of Staff could stick to the particular questions and give as much detail as possible.

I note that Dr. Mellett is saying he would like more initiatives. I suppose the difference between him saying that and me saying that is that I am not the Chief of Staff. I am not in a position to implement initiatives I would like. I hear what he is saying when he says he could not implement a thing like a crèche, which would give me alarm bells.

He mentioned the issue of harassment and I will deal with that. We can talk in generalisations but it is good when we deal with a specific example because it portrays the reality on the ground, rather than how we might like to get there. As the Chief of Staff said he takes harassment very seriously, I will deal with an incident and we will see if it is acceptable or not. This was obviously a very concerning incident on one of the naval ships last year where a woman was falsely imprisoned by two male NCOs who broke into her cabin, wearing just towels around their waists, and harassed her to the point that she left the Naval Service absolutely terrified.

In response, the two men received reprimands which will basically disappear from their records after about two years. None of the supervisors received any punishment for not ensuring discipline was maintained on their ship and the commanding officer was quickly promoted to commander after that. Add that to the fact of the spyhole being discovered earlier this year in the female shower area in the naval headquarters and, as far as we know, nobody was sanctioned for that.

Can the Chief of Staff comment on what specifically is being done about sexual harassment? Is it a safe place for women? How can women have confidence in the Defence Forces' policy when that reality that I described happened? It did not seem to me that was dealt with properly, or does he think it was?

Dr. Mark Mellett: There is a process. I am not familiar with the incident to which the Deputy referred. We have an investigative process when an incident merits a military police investigation. That has happened in the case of the spyhole. That is subject to an ongoing military investigation and the outcome has not been reached.

I am not aware of the first incident Deputy Clare Daly mentioned. If there is additional material that would inform that event more broadly, I would welcome receiving it. I have confidence in the investigations within our institutions and the requirement for the military police to have the ability to investigate fully, take statements from all those involved, and for victims, without fear or favour, to be able to give evidence about events.

Deputy Clare Daly: I am a bit concerned that the Chief of Staff does not know about it because it has been in the media. A young woman left the Naval Service. I raise this issue very much in the context of Dr. Mellett saying he wants women to join the service and stay, yet here is an incredibly serious incident of harassment, of which top management is not aware. It strikes me that the systems are failing. I encourage him to go back and look at it because it is a very serious problem and might inform him of some of the reasons women find it difficult to stay. Reference was made to pregnant women. Will Dr. Mellett give us an assurance that he thinks women have not been intimidated? I have heard reports that they have. Has a survey of women ever been carried out? An analysis of the reasons women were leaving would have to be included.

Dr. Mark Mellett: To deal with the latter point, I have read research into the issues surrounding women within the Defence Forces becoming pregnant and seen some challenging comments in that regard. I have spoken to the deputy Chief of Staff, support, DCOS support, about ensuring the parameters of A7 which concerns the norms and principles in being a ser-

vice woman in the Defence Forces are applied without fear or favour. It is not acceptable that there would be any differentiation between somebody who is and is not pregnant. There may be constraints and restrictions in terms of where somebody who is pregnant can operate within the Defence Forces which is linked with health and safety, but I am committed to ensuring it is in place. In addition, I do not want to have a situation where anybody is disadvantaged on the basis of being pregnant within the Defence Forces. To reassure Deputy Clare Daly, it is not compatible with a desire, an obligation or a capability driver to have a better gender balance in the organisation if we have principles and practices that are not conducive to it. I take on board her points, but I am not sitting on my hands and saying everything is fine. I have read the research. I engage on and contribute to it and give leadership at every opportunity I can at command level.

Deputy Clare Daly: Dr. Mellett might go back and look at the incidents because if there is a difficulty in trying to establish a crèche in meeting blocks in that regard, there is obviously a systemic problem. Processes and practices are one thing, but these are real incidents that are affecting real women.

Dr. Mark Mellett: The reason we did not establish a crèche was I could not find a cohort who were interested in utilising it. I felt such an initiative would be family friendly and was amazed that there was not a take-up by parents.

Deputy Clare Daly: It is a matter of listening to the issues women are raising that I am now putting to Dr. Mellett such as harassment. We do not need to discuss them further now, but I have no problem in saying here or outside that I believe there is a problem.

Chairman: Dr. Mellett can respond to Deputy Ó Snodaigh's questions. I will then call Deputy Jack Chambers. The format is that questions are grouped. It is not a matter of going back and forth as otherwise we would be here for the entire day. I will go back to Deputy Clare Daly. Deputy Ó Snodaigh asked some supplementary questions and Deputy Jack Chambers also indicated. We are running into time constraints.

Dr. Mark Mellett: I take Deputy Ó Snodaigh's point about the Phoenix Park. He provided clarification in that regard. The reality is that I have huge pride in the Defence Forces and the manner in which they delivered during the papal visit. It was critically important that we turned out and delivered the level of security appropriate to the event. It was not just security; it also involved providing support for civil society on the days surrounding the visit of the Pope.

On Deputy Ó Snodaigh's earlier point about those who were serving, there are a number of initiatives. I have said I want to see contracts addressed as soon as possible in order that we can give certainty. There is also the developing piece on re-enlistment on which we are in discussions with the Department. I accept that some people leave the Defence Forces, go elsewhere and perhaps develop to a certain extent. I want to be able to give them an opportunity to come back into the Defence Forces if they want to do so. We are already doing this in the case of officers. We have the opportunity to recommission officers who have left and want to come back in. Likewise, in terms of re-engagement, a matter which is related to individuals who are serving, we want to give staff the opportunity to make it more flexible for them to re-engage.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh also referred to people being able to work later in life. That is all on the table in terms of our advice to the Department in elaborating on terms and conditions of service within the Defence Forces. In fact, on one of the freedoms, I was trying to move on the issue of colour blindness. I have a working group looking at the issue of colour blindness and

transgender issues in the context of how we can have institutions that are appropriate. Going back to Deputy Clare Daly's point about colour blindness, one of the impediments is that 9% of the male community are colour blind, while only 1% of the female community are. That helps me in one area in bringing more men into the organisation, but it does not help me on the female side.

Specifically on the operations side, the Naval Service has the highest churn or turnover of personnel of the three services. That is a concern.

There has been an issue with a number of ships that did not sail. I have addressed it with the flag officer, the assistant Chief of Staff and the deputy Chief of Staff, support, in expediting an intake of recruits who will come in in the next week or so and bring a resource into the Naval Service. I have also engaged with the Minister on aspects of the Naval Service at which we need to look in the longer term to ensure it can maintain a level and tempo of operations suited to the Defence Forces.

On Operations Pontus and Sophia, a number of years ago the numbers crossing by the central Mediterranean route were in the hundreds of thousands. At that stage the Government made a policy decision that we should work in a bilateral way with the Italian Government. For a period we sent a number of ships to the Mediterranean, during which time they were extraordinarily busy, as was widely reported. A total of 18,000 men, women and children were rescued during the course of these deployments. During that time we saw hundreds of people drown and recovered scores of bodies. It was a very challenging period. The Government decided to shift to Operation Sophia, from which, as was mentioned by Deputy Ó Snodaigh, the ship returned recently. The focus of the operation was on disrupting those who were exploiting the vulnerable and the traffickers who were extracting money from migrants and pushing them out into the Mediterranean where they were left in a hopeless situation. The operation has been very successful in that there has been a dramatic reduction of more than 80% in the numbers using the central Mediterranean route. It does not mean that we are not in the business of meeting our commitments under the safety of life at sea, SOLAS, convention. In the context of the Operation Sophia missions, we have rescued hundreds of migrants. Nevertheless, the focus was primarily on disrupting the model used on that side.

A number of Deputies spoke about air traffic control. I am trying to consolidate the resource and build it up. We are providing a service from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m. on the basis that we need to husband the resource, with a view to ensuring we can build it back up and move back to providing a 24-hour service. That is a decision I had to make with the Minister. People often accuse me of not cutting my cloth to measure, but that is an example of where we had to look at the resources available in the context of the constraints on the utilisation of that resource.

On the utilisation of the budget, we have a high level planning and procurement group, HLPPG. It deals with how we expend resources within the Defence Forces. It is done in collaboration with the Department of Defence in order that there is due diligence and governance in expenditure in terms of the processes used in tendering and organising competitions in meeting the requirements of the public service pay and spending code.

Chairman: Deputy Jack Chambers indicated that he had a brief supplementary.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Out of respect for other members, I did not ask further questions earlier.

Dr. Mellett has mentioned that he wants to engage with the Public Service Pay Commission to give his narrative and perspective. It is slightly unusual that he would plead publicly with a pay commission based on a submission on which he says he signed off. Why does there have to be a public plea and an engagement if Dr. Mellett is full square behind the submission that was made? We know it contained none of the recommendations he submitted to the Department of Defence. Why is that required if he can fully justify what was submitted? What if the Public Service Pay Commission comes back with the same recommendations as it did with regard to nurses and other healthcare professionals? In that case, there is dissatisfaction and we have not seen any improvement. Based on the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's recommendations we will probably not see improvements. Dr. Mellett said he is fully behind what was submitted. Will he clarify why he needs this public plea if he is fully satisfied with what he says he signed off on? When does he expect the retention policy to be published? When does he expect the Defence Forces to meet the White Paper target of 9,500? Will he give an update on his engagement at a European level regarding PESCO and what involvement the Irish military has had in that? Will he give some operational updates?

The Comptroller and Auditor General expressed concerns about the cybersecurity unit within the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. Dr. Mellett mentioned cybercrime in his opening statement. Would he like to see the Defence Forces build greater expertise there? In terms of defence policy, are we fit for purpose in terms of the growing concerns the public and private sector have about cybersecurity? Ireland deals with cybersecurity as an IT management issue rather than a security issue. There are people seconded to that Department but the Comptroller and Auditor General stated it had no strategic direction and serious concerns were mentioned. Would Dr. Mellett like to see something established within his policy responsibilities around that issue?

Dr. Mark Mellett: I thank the Deputy for his questions. I have a responsibility to give advice to the Minister and the Government. That applies to the institutions of Government, of which the Public Service Pay Commission is one. There is context only a member of the Defence Forces can provide. It is a context that comes from seeing the men and women of the Defence Forces, who serve in Mali, Syria or the Mediterranean, on the ground delivering defence, security and Government services in very challenging environments. The only person who can articulate that is somebody who has been shoulder to shoulder with the soldiers, sailors and air crew. I sense I have a strong position to bring to bear on what is unique about the Defence Forces in the context of other aspects of the public sector.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh asked how we get to know the Defence Forces better. This forum is an opportunity to do that. It allows the Chief of Staff to set out his stall on why the Defence Forces is a unique institution, why they are critical as the bedrock of the sovereignty of this State and why they contribute so effectively to the institutions of civil society. Sometimes we take it for granted when people are free, the institutions of State function and the vulnerable are-----

Deputy Jack Chambers: Did the submission do that?

Dr. Mark Mellett: I feel I will be able to add value to the submission in an engagement with the Public Service Pay Commission and I will be able to give the Defence Forces' perspective in terms of its men and women because I have a loyalty to the men and women of the Defence Forces. Opportunities come to pass and it is my leadership role to seize them.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is interesting that Dr. Mellett is required to bring that to the Public Service Pay Commission and that his perspective was not fully articulated in the submis-

sion to the commission.

Dr. Mark Mellett: In fairness to the commission, it has been normalised because other heads of agencies have been before it. I presume members of the HSE hierarchy went before the Public Service Pay Commission. I am not too sure. It is not a plea. It is a development and a statement of facts and perspectives in the context of the challenging environment in which Defence Forces' men and women deliver services at home and abroad. I am uniquely competent to be able to do that.

With regard to the retention policy, I mentioned earlier that we set out the climate survey action plan which had 54 items on it. It is a document that is open for management within the Defence Forces and concerns what is happening in various areas. Every time I go to meet the troops, whether a formal visit with their command team or in a town hall, I set out where we are in terms of the various initiatives with regard to retention within the Defence Forces. Some of those are still questions I am pursuing in the context of the issue of the contracts and the White Paper projects relating to retention. That is the development of terms and conditions that allow us to extend personnel and services in a manner whereby we will retain the maximum number.

The issue of the cyberdefence of the State obviously involves the Defence Forces. We have contributed significantly to the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment as some former members have moved across there. For a period we had a number of personnel who were seconded there to support the centre. My priority is to watch my networks to ensure I can provide cyberincident response teams to ensure our networks are protected because if our networks are vulnerable or attacked, my capacity to have the coherence to deliver defence, security and Government services will be undermined. My priority is to look at protection within the Defence Forces. We have a very highly functioning critical cyberincident response team process. I am ready and open to opportunities that could come in the future in the context of broadening the Defence Forces but that would have to be driven within a policy framework that would, in the first instance, be established by the Minister and the Department.

Deputy Jack Chambers: What about PESCO and the 9,500 target?

Dr. Mark Mellett: We are in tranche 1 of PESCO and we are involved in two projects. One is dealing with maritime surveillance which is very appropriate given the size of our maritime domain. The issue around maritime surveillance is we need to be smart in terms of how we apply limited assets over an area of 1 million sq. km. We can benefit from engagement with the collaborative network that PESCO would provide in terms of development and new ways of doing things. It would mean we are more efficient. The other project is very much linked to training which is an area that is a Defence Forces' meat and two vegetables. It is looking at a training centre of competence and how we can learn and develop these centres of competence in a manner that allows us to deliver training to the best of our ability.

Deputy Jack Chambers: When does Dr. Mellett expect the 9,500 White Paper target to be met?

Dr. Mark Mellett: As soon as we can. It is critically important we continue to focus on retention. In terms of my strategic planning framework, I have set consolidation as the main effort. We need to consolidate around retaining people who are in service. The second thing is expediting recruitment, but recruitment in a manner whereby we have a healthy turnover of personnel as opposed to the situation at present where we are challenged by a higher turnover than is desirable of people who are leaving prematurely. I am endeavouring to reduce the numbers

leaving prematurely and at the same time trying to maximise the numbers who will come into the organisation. It is a competition. There is a buoyant market. Individuals are getting-----

Deputy Jack Chambers: Dr. Mellett has no projections on when he will meet the target.

Dr. Mark Mellett: I can look at a potential, if I can get the turnover down to around 7%. It will be around 2020 or 2021 when we get it to 9,500. I have to be pragmatic. I would add a caution to that-----

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is after the target set by the White Paper. The White Paper said five years.

Dr. Mark Mellett: No. In 2025 the White Paper will have had its ten years. My current target is 2021. I do not want to be held to that. My planning requirement is to reduce the churn within the Defence Forces as a whole with a view to reducing the numbers leaving prematurely and maximising the numbers coming in and training and developing of new recruits.

Senator Gabrielle McFadden: I apologise for running out on Dr. Mellett earlier. I have not yet managed the art of bilocation. I do not know if Dr. Mellett already answered these questions when I was not present in the committee room. I have two supplementary questions from when I spoke earlier. One was on the current figure. I agree completely with the point made by Dr. Mellett about focusing on retention. The figure is 9,500. Where exactly are we as of today with that figure of 9,500? Dr. Mellett may have answered that question when I was gone.

Earlier, I asked how Dr. Mellett reckons the so-called new structure is working. Many soldiers I talk to tell me it is not working and has made their lives difficult. If Dr. Mellett could change it, what would he do? What would the ideal situation be?

Dr. Mark Mellett: Our whole-time equivalent strength at the moment is a little under 9,000. That means we are slightly more than 500 below strength. That is approximately 92% of our employee control framework strength. As I mentioned to Deputy Jack Chambers, my desire is to progress towards 9,500 as soon as possible.

Reference was made to the current lay-down. The Defence Forces organisational structure is set out in terms of the 2012 review that established the current lay-down. The question of what is fit for purpose for the Defence Forces is under continuous review in the context of how we can best shape and utilise the resources. I engage with the Minister and the Department on that question. Several issues arise in the context of our current 2012 organisation system and projects in the White Paper, including doubling the Army Ranger wing and our command and control arrangements within the Defence Forces. All these issues point towards a need to look at the Defence Forces in the context of how we deliver on these projects, with a view to ensuring that we are fit for purpose. That is a dynamic and ongoing process of review. There are challenges with the current structure but we should not deal with them piecemeal. We have to look at the interlinking nature of them. Given that several White Paper projects have a significant development aspect to them, I am looking at how we can manage them together by working with the Minister and the Department.

Deputy Clare Daly: I am used to meetings of the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality where discussion goes to and fro for hours on end. In any case, we will have to have Dr. Mellett back soon enough seeing as this is his first appearance.

My difficulty is that there is something of a disconnect between the talk and the reality. Dr.

Mellett made the point that the Government made the decision for us to participate in Operation Sophia. While that is correct, it did so on the basis of advice and a recommendation from Dr. Mellett. In that context, when Dr. Mellett was advising the Government, did he officially notify it at the time of the manpower or staff crisis in the Naval Service? Did he officially notify the Government that the Naval Service was not in a position to fulfil its core maritime protection duties at the time?

We are aware that there was a meeting between the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority and the Defence Forces in June of this year. High-level meetings took place between the Department and the Naval Service in July and again in September. I have a letter from someone in the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority in response to a parliamentary question tabled in recent weeks. It is a hard-hitting letter and, let us face it, civil servants do not normally send hard-hitting letters to politicians. It states that the authority has significant concerns about the negative impact of the staffing issues being experienced by the Naval Service in respect of fisheries protection duties. The authority is projecting that inspection numbers for this year will be 15% to 20% lower than in 2017. That is utterly shocking.

We have heard much talk in the media about the Naval Service, which is unusual for a disciplined force and reflects discontent among the ranks. We know the *LÉ Eithne* could not go out on a routine patrol. We know about the ships stuck in Haulbowline. We know about the 72 hour notice that was subsequently cancelled. These developments smack of chaos. The fact is that the Naval Service cannot undertake its sea fisheries protection duties. Two things are at issue. The first relates to a breach of the responsibilities of the Naval Service in this regard and whether Dr. Mellett officially notified the Government of the manpower crisis when advising on participation in Operation Sophia. The second relates to when Dr. Mellett made the case for a ninth ship. Did he discuss the staffing crisis in the Naval Service with the Department at the time? This is especially relevant since Dr. Mellett is not the Accounting Officer and cannot, therefore, increase the budget for recruitment. Is there a full paper trail covering when Dr. Mellett alerted the Department on that point?

The issue of retention is relevant. Dr. Mellett made the point that recruitment has started and he is delighted with that. That is grand but when an organisation recruits a new staff member, it takes a good deal of time to bring the new person into the place of the person he or she is replacing. The real problem is not only the numbers but the question of not having the right ranks with the right skill sets. In that context, will Dr. Mellett comment on the shortage of able seamen? We have been told – Dr. Mellett may be able to verify or repudiate this statement – that the ordinary seaman, effectively an apprentice, has been renamed as able seaman PQ, which stands for partly qualified, to hide the cracks. That could refer to someone who has never set foot on a ship but is about to do this job. If that is the case, it does not inspire confidence. What specific measures are in place to retain personnel? A total of €100,000 or thereabouts is what it costs to get someone to the level of able seaman. It is frightening to have that expertise wasted.

Dr. Mellett possibly touched on my next question already. How many personnel in the Naval Service currently have discharges pending? I am curious about that.

How many jobs has Dr. Mellett applied for since he took on the role of Chief of Staff? Does he not think that is a destabilising influence? If he is looking for other jobs, it might mean he is not really wedded to his current job. Will he comment on that? I will leave it at that for this round.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I wish to add one question to the questions from Deputy Clare

Daly. Dr. Mellett mentioned the importance of dealing with the whole issue of stress. I have been alerted by a member of the Defence Forces to the fact that there is no psychiatrist available for non-commissioned officers at present. Is that true? A psychiatrist is available for commissioned officers but not for non-commissioned officers. The the previous psychiatrist retired some months ago, he was treating more than 800 patients. He has not been replaced. Given that stress is a major factor in the Defence Forces for various reasons, it seems strange that a new psychiatrist has not been appointed.

Dr. Mark Mellett: I will deal with the question on the psychiatrist first. We have been endeavouring to recruit a psychiatrist for some months now. The matter has been in the market in terms of looking for an applicant. The competition closed in September with no applicant. The individual providing the services retired earlier this year.

The issue with regard to the availability of services for all Defence Forces personnel is a priority for me. Private facilities have been made available for all personnel within the Defence Forces until we find a psychiatrist who can be brought onto our books as a permanent resource. Deputy Wallace's point is correct in the sense that there was a period, I believe, when the policy was that enlisted ranks were not getting access to a psychiatrist other than through the public system. However, that has been expedited and moved to a point now, if I am correct-----

Deputy Mick Wallace: The service is available if required.

Dr. Mark Mellett: If the requirement exists for a private intervention, it is made available in the context of the medical officer.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Everyone has access at the moment. Is that correct?

Dr. Mark Mellett: Yes, if it is required. Everyone has access at the moment.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Who decides whether intervention is required?

Dr. Mark Mellett: The medical officers within the Defence Forces make the decision. We have several medical officers. Someone mentioned the issue of medical services earlier. We are recruiting four additional medical officers this week. We have primary care with medical officers. Then, in the context of the services specifically required, regardless of whether a person is an officer or from an enlisted rank, if it in the area of psychiatry, private resources will be made available for the person they are deemed necessary.

On the number of jobs I have applied for, I was privileged to be nominated by Government to compete for the appointment of chairman of the European Union Military Committee. That was a decision of Government. It was not my decision. I accepted the nomination and competed for the position, but I was not successful. That is the only opportunity outside the Defence Forces that I have looked at in decades. There is a good deal of commentary on social media suggesting that I am going here, there and everywhere, when I am not.

Deputy Clare Daly: It is important that such a matter is aired.

Dr. Mark Mellett: This is an excellent opportunity to clear it up.

Deputy Clare Daly: It is good that it is put on the record.

Dr. Mark Mellett: I am glad the Deputy asked about the Naval Service because there are challenges in this area. Ships have been stopped for personnel reasons and for mechanical rea-

sons. There was a loss of 5% of the total patrol days this year, which is minimal. I would like to see the letter from the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority. I know the chief executive well and we engage regularly. We will address any challenges in delivering defence or Government services. There is a shift in the Naval Service in the context of the delivery of fisheries protection towards more risk-assessed boardings and inspections. This doctrine developed in my time in the service when a boarding operation took seven hours before the truth was established. At the end of the seven hours, we found one of the most sophisticated means of flouting the Common Fisheries Policy that we had come across. The vessels had been inspected many times before but they were short inspections. Now we profile vessels to ensure they are not flouting the Common Fisheries Policy. The new risk-based approach means the number of inspections is going to go down. If, as the Deputy said, there has been a reduction of 20% that would tally with my experience but I can get further details for her if she requires.

I am very proud of the Naval Service but the decisions - whether they relate to Operation Sophia or Operation Pontus - are for Government to make. I give advice but the final call is a policy matter. I was asked if Operation Sophia is an acceptable deployment for us and for the 25 other states which are part of it. The general staff considered it an acceptable deployment and advised accordingly.

The decision to be a nine-ship service was also made by the Government and is covered in the programme for Government. Now we have to start the arrangements for the manning of the ninth ship.

Deputy Clare Daly: I accept that these decisions are matters for Government but my point is that Government acted on the advice and recommendation of Dr. Mellett. When he gave his advice and recommendation, did he tell the Government of the manpower and staffing crisis that existed at the time? The Naval Service should feel bound to deliver on the service level agreement it signed with the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority because this is a key responsibility. If boardings are going to be down by between 15% and 20%, the service will be in breach of the agreement. It was the director of corporate affairs of the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority who sent us the letter, which stated that the organisation had serious concerns about staffing.

I had two questions for Dr. Mellett. Did he advise Government that Operation Sophia and the move to a nine-ship service were for it to decide on, but that the Naval Service could not do it because it could not even do its real job, which is reflected in the figures? The service has a responsibility to the authority under the contract the two signed but it seems to fall well short of that.

Dr. Mark Mellett: I give advice to Government across a range of areas in the delivery of defence and the security of Government services. The fundamental role of the Defence Forces is the delivery of defence services and this is our *raison d'être*. We are the guarantors of sovereignty in the first instance and second to that is security. Third are Government services, such as fisheries protection and services for Departments. I have to look at broader issues than just the arrangements with Government agencies. I was satisfied, and remain so, that the Defence Forces can continue to deliver on their commitments to the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority. There is a review mechanism and I am delighted that meetings have taken place to look at how the Naval Service is delivering on its commitments under the service level agreement. It has not, however, been brought to my attention that there is an issue with, or any inability to meet, the commitments we have with the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority.

Deputy Clare Daly: If there is a reduction of 15% or 20%, does Dr. Mellett not think that fails to meet the terms of the agreement?

Dr. Mark Mellett: I made the point about risk-assessed boardings to demonstrate how the Naval Service is delivering its service to the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority.

Deputy Clare Daly: I presume the Naval Service and the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority agree this sort of thing jointly. I am not saying this - I am only informing Dr. Mellett as to what the authority told me. It is stating that there is a problem but Dr. Mellett is saying there is no problem. That means there is a problem. Perhaps there has been an element of miscommunication but it is not nothing.

Dr. Mark Mellett: It is nothing if I am not aware of it. It has not been brought to my attention that there is a deficit in meeting the requirements of the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority. I will take away what the Deputy has said and I will look at it in the context of our commitments.

Deputy Clare Daly: The fact that Dr. Mellett has not been informed is even more frightening. It is a key naval responsibility and Dr. Mellett is the main man. If the people responsible are not telling him, that is a concern.

Dr. Mark Mellett: Many things go on in the Defence Forces and I cannot micromanage every issue. My deputy chief of staff for operations oversees the flag officer who, in turn, commands the Naval Service. He has individuals within the service who deliver services.

Deputy Clare Daly: I appreciate that. I mentioned a harassment case earlier. I could not blame Dr. Mellett for being unaware of the details of such a case, except for the fact that it was in the media and was quite unusual in that it required the disciplining of a person. This issue, however, is on a different level because it relates to a key naval function. If there are not enough staff, that is a problem. It seems to be the first time that this has happened. It may have been kept quiet on previous occasions and perhaps the fact that it has leaked out on this occasion is an indication of low morale. There has been a lot of talk about positive measures being undertaken. I do not doubt Dr. Mellett's intention in this regard but, on the ground, the outcomes are going backwards and morale is getting worse. Whatever systems are in place they do not seem to be working, something we see in the context of retention and in the service level agreement relating to coastal protection.

Dr. Mark Mellett: Since I joined the Naval Service 42 years ago, ships have stopped because of personnel and for mechanical reasons. This is part of the battle rhythm of delivering a complex service. There are challenges but they are not challenges which have not happened in the past and we are managing them. One of the key areas is retention. As already stated, there are two aspects to consolidation, namely, the retention of serving personnel, which involves cutting our cloth appropriately, and recruitment, in which we endeavour to get young men and women to join the Defence Forces, particularly the Naval Service. That process is ongoing. There is a competitive market for able seamen. We are at approximately 84% and there are a number who, for various reasons, are not available for seagoing, which makes it difficult to guarantee the level of service we provide. We are trying to expedite recruitment, The competitive edge in the Defence Forces also has a pay aspect and that is why I made the case to the Public Service Pay Commission. I want to double down on that, particularly in the context of the Naval Service and the higher level of churn to which it is subject.

Deputy Clare Daly: The White Paper on Defence puts sea fisheries as the service's day-to-day primary function and that is why I am so concerned about this matter. There is a lack of adequately skilled staff to put the vessels out to do what the White Paper on Defence states is the Naval Service's primary job. The facts indicate that we do not have this so there seems to be a disconnect. I am not sure we have all the answers here but I would be concerned. Did Dr. Mellett deal with the able seaman partly qualified, PQ, and where that rank came from? What is that?

Dr. Mark Mellett: I assure the Deputy that anyone who goes to sea is qualified to do whatever is asked of him. There are legislative requirements in terms of firefighting and personal survival. We have a very sophisticated college in the National Maritime College of Ireland. The requirement to meet those requirements is there. With regard to how the flag officer utilises his resources, I would expect that he would be smart in terms of the resource available to him to ensure he can continue to meet his requirements in terms of delivery of services and at the same time, the development of personnel if, in this case, as the Deputy says, the individual was an apprentice.

Deputy Clare Daly: An able seaman PQ is basically an apprentice. The person is not an able seaman.

Dr. Mark Mellett: I have not heard that term before.

Deputy Clare Daly: Did Dr. Mellett hear the term previously?

Dr. Mark Mellett: No. I have not heard the term "able seaman PQ" previously.

Deputy Clare Daly: That is amazing.

Chairman: Dr. Mellett might send a briefing note to the committee in respect of the service-level agreement, the levels of activity and the meeting of commitments or indicating if there is a deficiency in implementing the agreement the Naval Service has with the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority? It is an important subject for all of us.

Dr. Mark Mellett: I would be delighted to do that. The priority of the Defence Forces is the delivery of defence services in the first instance. My responsibility to the Minister and the Government involves ensuring that in the context of our position, we meet our core requirement, which is defence services, and then the capacity to meet other requirements in terms of services to Departments. If there is a case - I will put this into the briefing note for committee - for looking at the level of services on offer to the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, we will do so. That is part of the ongoing discussions with the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority in terms of agreeing targets and levels of service so I will prepare a note for the committee.

Deputy Clare Daly: There seems to be a misunderstanding on this issue. The White Paper on Defence states that sea fisheries is a primary day-to-day task of the Naval Service. Dr. Mellett has indicated on more than one occasion that it is not and that it is very far down the list. We need clarity on that. The Naval Service signed up to the service-level agreement and agreed those targets. It is the agreement and those targets that are being breached. Dr. Mellett stated that the Naval Service is doing it differently now. If that is the case, the people with whom it signed the agreement should know that. That is the point that needs to be clarified. I am astounded that Dr. Mellett has never heard of an able seaman PQ.

Dr. Mark Mellett: I am delighted to provide further information about the agreement to the

Chairman, as requested. I have not heard the term “able seaman PQ” used in the past.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Mellett and his colleagues for appearing before. It is the first time a Chief of Staff has addressed an Oireachtas committee. Of course, we hope to have engagement in the future. When we invited Dr. Mellett to appear before us, he willingly came back and told us that he was at our disposal. We welcome his interest in coming before the committee and addressing questions. I thank Dr. Mellett for his clear presentation and the forthright manner in which he has taken a wide range of questions. I will not ask Dr. Mellett to respond because my colleagues have covered a lot of issues in respect of which I, as a Member of the Dáil for Cavan-Monaghan - which has had a very strong Irish Army tradition over the years - would have concerns. Pay and conditions are issues and they were raised by my colleagues.

I am very glad Dr. Mellett indicated that he has appointed a director in respect of the Reserve Defence Force. The Reserve Defence Force has often not received the credit it deserves concerning the role it plays. I previously mentioned the importance of the then Fórsa Cosanta Áitúil, FCA, more latterly the Reserve Defence Force, in helping many young people who may have been vulnerable to getting involved with the wrong company. These young people enlisted in the Reserve Defence Force and, in many instances, went on to progress to careers with the Permanent Defence Force. Great work was done, particularly in the Border area, in difficult years to ensure that young people who may have been vulnerable to getting involved with the wrong company were brought into the Reserve Defence Force and went on to play a very important and positive role in society. This has never been recognised in the way it should. It is important that the Reserve Defence Force is built up again to a better enlistment level. There were efforts some time ago to have more regionalisation in the organisation of the Reserve Defence Force. That did not happen. The part of the force in my region of Cavan, Monaghan and Longford was due to be regionalised more with the north-east but, thankfully, that did not happen. It is very important that we retain that local element to the structure of the Reserve Defence Force. I pass on the appreciation of local communities for the work it has done over many decades and the work it continues to do. Again, I thank the members of the Permanent Defence Force for the work they do on behalf of all of us on a daily basis.

I remind members that we are due to reconvene at 3.30 p.m. to meet a parliamentary delegation from Georgia. The next meeting after that will be on 29 November, when representatives from Crosscare, Safe Home Ireland and the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas will be before the committee to discuss the challenges and barriers facing returning emigrants.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.15 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Thursday, 29 November 2018.