

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL, AGUS COSAINTE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE, AND DEFENCE

Déardaoin, 30 Bealtaine 2019

Thursday, 30 May 2019

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Seán Barrett,	Gerard P. Craughwell,*
Noel Grealish,	Gabrielle McFadden.
Tony McLoughlin,	
Maureen O'Sullivan,	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Senator Billy Lawless.

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies Jack Chambers and Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Senator Terry Leyden.

Teachta / Deputy Brendan Smith sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senators Bacik and Ned O’Sullivan. I propose that we go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 9.35 a.m. and resumed in public session at 9.45 a.m.

Scrutiny of EU Legislative Proposals

Chairman: The list of legislative proposals in Schedule B includes COM (2019) 39, COM (2019) 74, COM (2019) 105, COM (2019) 139 and COM (2019) 194. It is proposed that these proposals do not warrant further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Retention of Defence Forces Personnel: Discussion with Representative Association of Commissioned Officers

Chairman: Today we are meeting from the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers Commandant Conor King, general secretary; Lieutenant Colonel Derek Priestley, deputy general secretary; and Commandant Shane Keogh, president. They are most welcome. This committee holds the men and women of the Permanent Defence Force and the Reserve Defence Force in the highest regard. At every opportunity, it has highlighted the importance of setting out firm policies and actions for the retention of personnel in the Defence Forces to both the Minister of State with responsibility for defence matters and departmental officials. Committee members look forward to hearing the presentation by RACO on these very important issues.

Members, witnesses and those in the Visitors Gallery are requested to ensure that for the duration of the meeting their mobile phones are turned off completely or switched to airplane, safe, or flight mode, depending on the device used. It is not sufficient to leave them in silent mode as it will still maintain a level of interference with the broadcasting and recording systems.

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. If, however, they are directed by the Chairman 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 long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or an entity outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I call on Commandant King to make his opening statement.

Mr. Conor King: 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 on behalf of the officers of Óglaigh na hÉireann to highlight the current retention crisis that affects all ranks

of the organisation and sincerely thank the committee for its invitation. It is heartening to note the interest of committee members in the welfare of Defence Forces personnel. These loyal citizens now need their support more than ever. I am joined today by Lt. Col. Derek Priestley, who is deputy general secretary of the association, and the president of RACO, Commandant Shane Keogh.

In discussing the retention crisis, I will also touch on a number of contributing factors, including the lack of viable or credible retention policies in the Department of Defence and the weakened industrial relations status of the Defence Forces representative associations. Sadly, the Government has exploited this situation to the detriment of the well-being of the officers, soldiers, sailors and aircrew of Óglaigh na hÉireann. The State has been left vulnerable as a result. Although Richard Branson may not be viewed as an eminent military strategist, these words attributed to him are quite apt in this context: “Train people well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so they don’t want to.” In the Defence Forces, we train our people to the highest standards at no small cost to the Exchequer. We align the qualifications achieved with best industry practice and academic accreditation, thereby satisfying the first criterion of Mr. Branson’s statement. We then fail miserably in fulfilling the second part of his maxim.

The dysfunctional cycle of turnover being suffered by the Defence Forces was identified by researchers from the University of Limerick in 2015 and 2017. It has continued unabated. Óglaigh na hÉireann is now at its lowest strength in decades. In more than 20 years of service, I have certainly never seen morale as low as it is today. This trend appears set to continue according to numerous employee engagement surveys of Defence Forces personnel and RACO’s own recent research. Some 3,200 personnel left the Defence Forces between 2014 and 2018. That is an astonishing 34.7% of the average strength for those years. Before people conclude that this is due to the early mandatory retirement ages for Defence Forces personnel, I should point out that 82% of these departures were premature voluntary retirements. Numerous media publications reported recently that the unprecedented recruitment drive in 2017 yielded a single figure net increase in personnel and that €15 million was spent on induction training that year. It may shock the committee to learn that the Defence Forces attempted to induct a similar number of candidates through a highly visible and professional recruitment campaign last year and, frighteningly, there was actually a net loss of 120 personnel.

In March this year, RACO reported to the Public Service Pay Commission that the turnover rate was a devastatingly high 8.1%. That rate now stands at 9% overall, and it is 14% in the Naval Service. In comparison, the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence recently declared a retention crisis when the turnover rate in the UK armed forces reached 5%. There were 256 discharges from the Defence Forces in the first four months of 2019. This is by far the highest figure since the reorganisation of 2012. An unprecedented 86 discharges took place in April 2019 alone. The impact of operating with reduced numbers is already being felt across the Defence Forces. The Army is struggling to fulfil its assigned tasks, domestically and internationally. Ships are unable to go to sea and aircraft are not flying as a result of personnel shortages, yet the Department of Defence continues to prioritise costly recruitment policies over tangible retention initiatives. This historically high turnover rate is leading to the creation of a crippling operational and training tempo for the remaining service personnel. When will the Government shout stop? Does it realise that defence capability is being ground into the dust? Does it care?

Inadequate supervision and mentoring, combined with inadequate trained manning levels, leads to inevitable burnout. That creates serious concerns for governance and the ability to

manage risk and ensure the well-being of our personnel. The climate survey and focus group reports conducted by the University of Limerick laid bare the mental health difficulties, increased stress and low morale being experienced by Defence Forces soldiers, sailors and aircrew. Our people are double and treble jobbing in an effort to maintain operational output due to inadequate trained manning levels in units.

According to the Central Statistics Office, CSO, the personnel of the Defence Forces have been the lowest paid of any organisation in the public sector for many years. This is ironic given that the Institute of Public Administration, IPA, has consistently reported that the Defence Forces is by far the most trusted public service organisation in the State, with a trust score of 82%. Something does not add up. Some 87% of all Defence Forces personnel earn well below the average public sector wage. Senior Government officials have been heard to remark that someone needs to be the lowest paid. The fact that the lowest paid public sector organisation in the State is also the most defenceless in terms of advocating for its rights is deeply unfair and disrespectful to the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann, many of whom are forced to rely on social welfare to support their families.

Normal public service employment conditions do not apply to members of the Defence Forces. Serving Defence Forces personnel forfeit normal employee status while remaining subject to military law at all times. They have no right to strike and they can be called on 24-7, 365 days of the year. Their unlimited liability contract requires them to face hardship and danger for the benefit of others. The health and safety provisions of the EU working time directive do not apply to the Defence Forces and the State is in breach of this EU legislation. Personnel are subject to mandatory early retirement and annual military standard medical and fitness testing. While we voluntarily accept these unique constraints, we expect to be treated fairly in return. The obligation on defence management, in recognition of these service restrictions and industrial relations limitations, should be to advocate on behalf of the personnel of the Defence Forces. RACO members instead see an ongoing failure on the part of the Department of Defence to protect our weakened employee status and ensure that the personnel of the Defence Forces are not disadvantaged relative to other public service employees. The Department's approach to representation has been divisive, dismissive and, sometimes, subversive. This has led to an adversarial and dysfunctional industrial relations climate and that has been to the detriment of the well-being of the most loyal citizens of this State. It is nothing short of shameful. I am happy to elaborate further if required by the committee.

The Department of Defence has failed to prioritise retention in the Defence Forces. This is the case even though it is evident that the continual recruitment campaigns are failing to address the ongoing reduction in overall strength, particularly where the underlying reasons for the continued exodus of personnel also remain unresolved. Given that the Department of Defence saves millions of euro every year on the backs of its employees - €26.5 million in 2016 - why does it not see fit to introduce retention initiatives? This approach is in stark contrast to our near neighbours across the Irish Sea. Respect and value for servicemen and women in the United Kingdom are enshrined in an armed forces covenant. That covenant recognises the freedoms willingly given up by military personnel and their families and the restrictions and hazards they face but, in return, it pledges to support, protect and treat them fairly. Let us not forget that soldiers are citizens too. The State must reconsider how it values its Defence Forces and what exactly it expects of them. Ireland spends a comparatively negligible 0.3% of GDP on defence, the lowest figure in the European Union and behind even Luxembourg and Malta. This level of spending speaks volumes about how seriously this State views the security of its citizens and economy.

Initiatives to increase numbers have included reductions in the established benchmarks of entry standards, training standards and timelines. The dilution of security clearance measures and the reduction in recruit and cadet basic training timelines have had the objective of reducing the time taken to increase the numbers. These measures have had no medium or long-term impact other than to potentially expose the organisation to greater operational and organisational risk. No amount of water will fill a leaky bucket. In the face of strong objections from RACO, the Department enthusiastically dispensed with the internationally proven model of fixed period promotion for technical officers of the ordnance and engineer corps. That change left these officers with no viable career paths and effectively showed them the door. They are now faced with a choice of returning to line units or leaving the Defence Forces if they wish to advance their careers. In either event, six years of full-time training at significant cost to the Exchequer, as well as several invaluable years spent learning the trade, are being lost.

The Department of Defence also removed retention initiatives for pilots. That has left the Air Corps on its knees, with the shortfall in pilots now standing at more than 30% and counting. Coupled with chronic shortages in aircraft technicians, this has threatened operational capability and impacted on service delivery. Despite the unprecedented levels of induction training, officer instructors continue to be denied the specialised instructor allowance. This allowance was taken from them under the Haddington Road agreement and has yet to be reinstated. Non-commissioned officer, NCO, instructors continue to receive this payment, as is appropriate, but officers bear the ultimate responsibility. The single biggest factor negatively affecting retention in the Defence Forces, however, and hence the future viability of the organisation, has been the removal of the supplementary pension from those who entered the organisation after 1 January 2013. Government policy determines that all personnel are subject to early mandatory retirement ages, anywhere between their 54th or 60th birthday depending on the rank of officer. Hence the vast majority of post-2013 single pension scheme officers will retire a full ten years before they can receive the State pension. A recent RACO Amárach research survey found that a shocking 79% of officers inducted since 2013 intend to leave the organisation well in advance of their mandatory retirement age. The lack of an adequate pension provision for this cohort means that a significant majority feel that they have no future in the Defence Forces and will not stay long enough to develop and advance up the ranks and populate the chronic shortages at middle management level. The unprecedented level of cadet inductions and associated unbearable burden it has placed on training capacity will all have been for nothing. To his credit, the Minister of State has recognised this and has pledged to address it as a priority once pay issues have been resolved.

The 2015 White Paper on defence notes that the recruitment, training and development, and retention of suitable military personnel are essential factors in developing the military capabilities required to discharge the roles assigned by Government. Despite this, no initiative or review has been initiated to address these issues. The delay in commencing White Paper projects concerning the ongoing recruitment and retention issues is indicative of the current approach to personnel policy in the defence organisation. The consequence to the organisation is the current manning level crisis and loss of corporate memory and military expertise on an alarming scale.

The Minister of State and his officials claim that this White Paper and the identified projects towards implementation are cognisant of the priority of demands. Why then has the project team failed even to commence the most critical and pressing human resource projects which concern retention? None of the projects completed to date is assessed to have any significant impact on the retention crisis. The White Paper implementation approach has not yet yielded any tangible impact on the Defence Forces. RACO views it as nothing more than a box-ticking

exercise.

The cost benefit of retention is indisputable. The unique demands of Defence Forces service require unique, specialist, in-house military training and the development of military specialist skills. A direct entry civil engineer would have to undergo two years' military training and professional development in military engineering competencies before being available for operational tasking. Similarly, the costs associated with developing the range of military competencies can amount to €1.54 million for an ordnance bomb disposal officer at captain rank, or €1.72 million for a captain pilot in the Air Corps. The cost of training one officer cadet is estimated at more than €100,000 per student. At what point of dysfunction will management favour retention over the continual failing demands of recruitment? We cannot go to market to replace a middle manager such as an experienced captain or sergeant. We replace them with cadets and recruits. At a turnover rate of 9%, the policy is destined to fail.

With this in mind, a comprehensive external review, similar in nature and scope to the 1990 Gleeson Commission on Remuneration and Conditions of Service in the Defence Forces, or the recent Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland should now be considered by Government where management are unable or unwilling to address the underlying organisational issues.

The Defence Forces is surviving on the goodwill of its personnel, that willingness to go over and above the call of duty to achieve the mission or complete the task. The inability of personnel to take to the streets in protest at their appalling service conditions has resulted in them voting with their feet and leaving the organisation. It has been humbling, however, to witness the concerned efforts of veteran and family organisations in attempting to highlight the shameful treatment of service personnel. Their efforts have not gone unnoticed, and it is hoped they will not be in vain.

It is no exaggeration to state that the Defence Forces are staring into the abyss. The reported meagre recommendations of the Public Service Pay Commission have the potential, if implemented, to act as a catalyst for further departures. The Government should be encouraged to ensure that the loyalty displayed by thousands of soldiers, sailors and aircrew is reciprocated, that they are paid a living wage, and that their skills and experience are recognised for the indispensable and irreplaceable asset they truly are. RACO strongly recommends the adoption of a specific Defence Forces standing independent pay review body to ensure military personnel are fairly treated. Unnecessary suffering is the worst kind, and the Government has it within its power to remedy easily many of the retention difficulties being experienced by Óglaigh na hÉireann and to begin to rehabilitate this proud and loyal organisation. It is for the Government to decide whether we are finally going to take the security of our State seriously and allow our Defence Forces to do what they signed up for, namely, to strengthen the nation that they love and provide the security that allows our democracy and economy to flourish.

I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for their time and I am happy to take questions.

Chairman: I thank Commandant King for his detailed outline of the very serious issues facing the Defence Forces. I take it from his comments that he is concerned about the capacity of the Defence Forces to carry out its basic obligations and duties. I thank him for his detailed presentation. We will take questions from the members and we can have an exchange with Commandant King and his colleagues. I invite Deputy Jack Chambers to commence to be followed by Deputy Tony McLoughlin.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Chairman and I thank Commandant Conor King, Lieutenant Colonel Derek Priestley, and Commandant Shane Keogh for coming before us. Commandant King has painted a very stark picture of the decimation, demoralisation and destruction of the Defence Forces under the tenure of the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe. The common thread of defence policy in recent years has been his tenure in the Department of Defence and his refusal to budge on some of the key issues, as Commandant King has mentioned. The points outlined in respect of the dysfunctional cycle of turnover, the premature voluntary retirements, the fact that the turnover rate is up this year on previous years, the total deficiencies around the capacity and strength, and the recommendation for an external organisational review demonstrate the difficulty RACO has as an organisation in addressing properly the issues with the Department of Defence. It is shameful that a Department would treat a representative organisation with such disrespect and disregard.

I acknowledge the presence of Mr. Cathal Berry in the Visitors Gallery. He has provided a very alarming but unsurprising account in recent days. I thank him for his honesty and integrity in speaking out on behalf of the men and women of our Defence Forces, who are suffering daily.

Commandant King has highlighted the ongoing line and rhetoric from the Government that it will recruit its way out of this crisis, and one of the consistent responses from RACO and the other organisation in the Defence Forces is around retention initiatives. Will Commandant King provide some detail about what retention issues he would bring in? It is a fact that Ireland is breaching the working time directive on an ongoing basis when it comes to our Defence Forces. How has RACO engaged with the Department on that? The management of the Defence Forces have been brought kicking and screaming to court on the issue by the representative organisations. Will Commandant King provide some insight into his engagement with them? How does he envisage the future of representation of the Defence Forces and formalising it in a greater and substantive way? Will he provide a bit of detail on the relationship of RACO with the Department of Defence? One of the criticisms from Mr. Cathal Berry and others who have retired is that there is a serious issue in the Department of Defence and that is the net point that is coming up repeatedly.

In his opening statement, Commandant King stated that the White Paper implementation approach has not yielded any tangible impact and “RACO views it as nothing more than a box-ticking exercise”. Is it a barrier to progress on some of the key issues? Commandant King has mentioned the fall in the numbers in the Defence Forces, the difficulties around pay and conditions, and the fact that the turnover rate is rising and the Defence Forces cannot meet their White Paper target. Will Commandant King provide some detail about the implications of this retention crisis for the viability of the Defence Forces and the security of the State? For example, is the emergency ambulance service in Athlone under threat? Will he provide some detail? There is public alarm about what happened with the gorse fires and the response time to the fires in recent days. We have also had the Department of Defence stating there are no problems with the strength of the Defence Forces. It states the organisation is at 93%. This level of inaccuracy and spin from a Department is very worrying. How do the witnesses respond to its ongoing refusal to acknowledge the core crisis we have? The witnesses have said there is a poor level of governance in the Department. Will they outline their insight on this?

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I welcome the witnesses and I thank them for coming before the committee. I have had discussions with constituents who work at Finner Camp. What is meant by “strength in station”, a phrase the witnesses used in their comments? What is the number of officers stationed at Finner Camp? Is it very low at present, as I have been led to

believe? Some colleagues of the witnesses have spoken to me about income and salaries. Will the witnesses outline, or give an indication of, gross or weekly wages for ranks from three star private to colonel? I would like an indication of the rates of pay. It is important that people giving the service they do to the Defence Forces, which represent this country throughout the world, are well looked after. What educational and training opportunities are available to officers in the Army? It is vital that they have these given the work they do. They have been wonderful ambassadors throughout the world in peacekeeping and other areas. What are the criteria for promotional opportunities? Will the witnesses outline these and give some details? How do privates become officers? Is this the route that is taken? Is it the preferred option of RACO? I ask the witnesses to outline some of these details.

Mr. Conor King: I thank Deputies Jack Chambers and McLoughlin. I will start at the beginning and take the questions of Deputy Chambers first. He asked what retention initiatives we would bring in. We have been speaking about various retention initiatives with the Department of Defence and the official side in general for many years. We feel we are not being heard. We are fully aware that the Public Service Pay Commission is engaged in ongoing work. It is a specific pay commission identified to address the appalling rates of pay in the Defence Forces. The leaks that came out about what was proposed were extremely concerning. Until we see the final document we cannot know for certain but what I will say is the reported 10% increase in military service allowance for the most junior private equates to less than €1 a day gross and for a captain it equates to €1.29 per day gross. Such increases will not arrest the slide. I call on the committee to influence, if possible, the Public Service Pay Commission to have another look at how it will fix the problems in the Defence Forces.

Defence Forces members receive a unique set of allowances separate from the rest of the public sector. These take into account members' unlimited liability, unwillingness to strike or withdraw labour, their posting 24-7, 365 days a year, their exposure to danger and the fact that they are not protected under the working time directive. It is easy to separate these. As well as the military service allowance, there is the potential to increase allowances such as the patrol duty allowance for the Naval Service. As I said, the turnover rate in the Naval Service is 14%. There is also the security allowance and the return of premium payments for Saturday and Sunday duties, which was taken away during the financial crash. The crash is over. There are other various allowances, all of which were included by RACO in our detailed submission to the Public Service Pay Commission.

With regard to what else we could talk about with regard to retention initiatives, it is not just about remuneration. There are fundamental organisational structural issues within the Defence Forces, such as training establishments. Before the reorganisation, we had 500 personnel training establishments that gave a small bit of fat when we wanted to do induction training and we did not count this figure in our overall strength. This is no longer the case. We could do with a junior officer overseas establishment because when people go overseas their job is not filled at home and someone has to double job. It is the same for non-commissioned officers. We could do with having a transparent and accurate posting and human resource management policy for officers and NCOs. The most fundamental retention issue, and one we have been pursuing since 2011, although the Department has only started to speak to us about this in the past two years, is the working time directive, whose protections have been illegally denied to members of the Defence Forces. These are the retention issues I will mention for now.

Something else I mentioned in my opening statement was the return of fixed period promotion. It is a fallacy that we can recruit qualified highly specialised technical officers and non-

commissioned officers and expect them to be up to speed immediately. We spoke about the fact that it costs €1.7 million for a pilot and €1.5 million for an ordinance officer. These are the people on whom the State depends for its security. The fact that fixed period promotion was so enthusiastically removed by the Department of Defence beggars belief. It galls and upsets me to see friends, colleagues and cadet classmates of mine whom I trained with, and who joined the ordinance corps with a view to adding value to the State, found they were unable to maintain a work-life balance and their service to the Defence Forces because of failed Department of Defence policies.

With regard to the future of representation, in the opening statement we mentioned that our representative status had been taken advantage of by the Department of Defence. Its dismissive and divisive attitude to representation means we have effectively been neutered. When we go into pay talks we are outside the room. The decisions are already made and the deals have already been done. In the UK, the armed forces do not go into public service pay talks. It has a standing armed forces pay review body that recognises the unique nature of military service. It recognises the civil liberties that are given up and the facts that members have unlimited liability, exposure to hazard and danger and can be posted anywhere at any time for any duration at short notice, away from their families and loved ones. What the standing armed forces pay review body does is look at the pay and if there are gaps in the allowances and pay, it tweaks them immediately. There have been more than 43 reports since the inception of the armed forces pay review body. It is reactive and it works. Having such a body would mean Defence Forces representative associations would not have to go into public service pay talks and act like unions because that is not in our ethos or culture. We just want to be looked after by the State because we provide loyalty to the State.

We were asked why we described the White Paper as a box-ticking exercise. The White Paper is from 2015 and we are now in 2019. It includes 88 projects and actions. Every time we look for a brief on the White Paper from the Department of Defence, we come away frustrated and none the wiser about what is going on. It would be funny if it were not so serious. Five items listed by the Department of Defence as being transitioned to normal business and completed as White Paper projects were read out in the Dáil last year. They were Civil Defence, an employment support scheme, Red Cross, a major emergency management framework and civilian employees but none of these has any tangible effect on the retention crisis in the Defence Forces. That is why I say it is a White Paper box-ticking exercise. We have asked several times for specific briefings on retention projects from the White Paper but we have been met with silence.

The strength figures were mentioned. The Dáil was told that the current strength of the Defence Forces stood at 93% and that may be the case on paper, and under the personnel management system. It does not, however, take into account the fact that more than 500 personnel are on induction training at all times and are non-deployable. They cannot be legally given a rifle and told to go on an operation or an exercise. The figure does not account for the fact that there are more than 670 people overseas or that over 100 are on leave of absence at any given time. It also fails to account for the fact that at least 100 are on long-term detachments and on career courses, etc., which means they are not available to their units. These figures give a misleading representation of the current state of play in the Defence Forces. It may be reported that officer strength is 92% or 93% but we have to remember that at least 300 of the officers have only been commissioned in the past three years, because of the unprecedented panic in the recruitment that has taken place in the cadet school, which is stressed to the point of breaking. The figures paint an inaccurate picture of the strength of the Defence Forces.

The Deputy asked about the emergency air medical service. It would be remiss of me to comment on operational issues as they are matters for general staff and military management but the Air Corps is under severe stress at the moment. The current strength of pilots in the Air Corps stands at 70% and it is falling. The air traffic control office stands at 66% while NCOs are at 50%. It was reported recently that aircraft technicians in the helicopter wing of the Irish Air Corps were at 44%, with pilots at 59%. The man on the street can tell members that the organisation is under pressure and the service it provides must also be under pressure and under strain.

Governance is a serious concern of ours. Historically, governance at unit level was enshrined, particularly from the logistics side of the house, by a captain quartermaster, or a battalion or company quartermaster sergeant, with dedicated store staff who worked in the stream from the beginning of their careers. We have spoken to subject matter experts around the country and we have spoken to logistics experts in the Defence Forces. They have seen newly commissioned officers, such as second lieutenants who do not have the experience or the qualifications to fill the role of captain quartermaster, doing the job with no senior enlisted leadership, such as a company quartermaster sergeant or a battalion quartermaster sergeant, in the unit to mentor or supervise them. It is rare to see the same officer or NCO in a logistics appointment for a full year. We visited a unit in February this year and learned that there was one captain out of eight in the unit in the middle management ranks. The logistics officer would normally be a captain of 15 years' experience but the job was being done by a second lieutenant.

Something has to give. We are seeing little accidents, the nature of which I will not go into, and we expect more unless something changes. It is due to a shortage of officers in the middle ranks. The majority of officers who are leaving are, ironically, from middle and upper management and this means captains are promoted to commandant more quickly. That may be a good thing but it is leaving gaps at the rank of captain. We are constantly robbing Peter to pay Paul and this is resulting in a loss of corporate knowledge of how the Defence Forces conduct their business. A significant number of young officers are coming under high levels of stress due to the organisational need to put responsibilities they are not equipped to deal with on their young shoulders. They do not have the mentoring or supervision to guide them or hold them by the hand. The execution of lethal force is a serious matter and a second lieutenant doing a captain's job is dangerous. I hope I have painted a clear enough picture for members. Have I answered all the questions?

Chairman: Deputy McLoughlin asked a question.

Mr. Conor King: Deputy McLoughlin is correct that the officer strength in Finner Camp has consistently been low in the past number of years. The last time I was there, there was one commandant out of five. The "strength in station" is the strength available to a unit commander to exercise his operations or the unit's daily duties. We see five officers out of 25 in some infantry battalions, we see a transport group with six out of 24 and we see an ordnance company, which is responsible for bomb disposal, at 16% of their officers. The figures are stark.

We work hard on education and training. We train for what we can predict and we educate for those things we cannot predict. We provide good education and training opportunities for our personnel, whom we accredit accordingly. We train people to the best of our ability and enable them to leave with good qualifications but we should be treating them as though we want them to stay, and we are not doing that. I do not have the rates of pay for the Defence Forces to hand but a recruit starts on €19,000 gross, graduating to €29,000. After 12 years, a private soldier will be on €37,000. Officers start at €35,000, once commissioned, and that goes all the

way up to €65,000 or €70,000 for the most senior commandant. Some 87% of the Defence Forces are on below the average public sector wage. There are opportunities for promotion and, ironically, shortages in middle management mean vacancies crop up on a regular basis. In the Air Corps, we currently have more vacancies than we have people qualified, such is the level of brain drain in the Air Corps. We cannot fill lieutenant colonel vacancies because we do not have people qualified to fill them.

There was a question about privates transitioning to commissioned life. Privates get a 6% increase in an interview process to recognise previous military service and we welcome the fact that a private soldier or non-commissioned officer wants to become an officer.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank the officers for coming in. They paint a bleak picture but they have spoken with a lot of honesty about the situation in the Defence Forces. We all know the excellent work the Defence Forces do. Where has it all gone wrong? In a recent article in *The Irish Times*, a former member of the Defence Forces, Ger Aherne, said the relationship between the Department and the Defence Forces was toxic and dysfunctional. Can the witnesses elaborate on that? Who in the hierarchy is fighting for members of the Defence Forces? Are senior officers doing what they should be doing? Is the Department fighting strongly enough for the members? Is the Minister of State doing so at the Cabinet table? Under previous Governments, there was a senior Minister for Defence but we now have a Minister of State with responsibility for defence. Much of this is happening on that watch. Do the witnesses have confidence that the Minister of State, the Department headed by its Secretary General, and the senior officers are fighting strongly enough to get for the ordinary members of the Defence Forces what they deserve, namely, fair play and fair pay?

Dún Ui Mhaoiliosa barracks is in Galway. I meet many members of the Defence Forces. Many have told me they are considering leaving to join An Garda Síochána and many members are doing so. They are trained and would make excellent members of the Garda Síochána. It is a disgrace that that is happening.

Commandant King addressed the threat to the emergency aeromedical service, EAS, based in Athlone. That issue was raised by my colleague, Deputy Jack Chambers. The EAS provides an excellent service. I live in County Galway and see the helicopter two or three times a day as it flies between Athlone and University Hospital Galway. I am sure it has saved many lives. I visited a hospital in Roscommon. If a patient there has a cardiac arrest or serious accident, the air ambulance is brought in straight away to bring the patient to University Hospital Galway. It would be very serious if that service were to come under threat.

Is the Naval Service experiencing the same crisis? Will boats be tied up in the docks in Galway, Cork or elsewhere because we do not have sufficient officers for them? New naval vessels were recently purchased. I ask the delegates to elaborate on that issue.

Unfortunately, some members of the Defence Forces are in receipt of family income supplement, FIS. How many receive it? It is a disgrace that that is happening. It is the only public sector organisation whose employees receive such a payment. I never heard of a garda or civil servant getting it, but members of the Defence Forces are.

On the strength of the Defence Forces, Commandant King stated that RACO strongly recommends the adoption of a specific Defence Forces pay review body to ensure military personnel are fairly treated. I ask him to elaborate on that.

Where has the relationship between the Department, the Minister of State with responsibility for defence and the organisation gone wrong? It seems to have stemmed from issues at the top of the ladder. Where do the witnesses consider the problem is? How can it be fixed?

Senator Gabrielle McFadden: The witnesses are very welcome. It gives me great pleasure to welcome a fellow Athlonian to the committee. Many of the questions I wished to ask have been addressed. I feel very strongly about this issue. I very much admire the respect shown by the witnesses to the committee, the Department and the Minister of State under difficult circumstances. The protests or parades by retired Sergeant Major Noel O’Callaghan have always had the themes of respect and loyalty. Those values come out in every member of the Defence Forces, no matter what they do, and I wish to acknowledge that.

For fear that today’s meeting might give a young person thinking of getting involved in or joining the Defence Forces the impression that it is all bleak, I would love for the witnesses to detail the positive side of the service in the Defence Forces, such as the benefits of overseas deployment, career enhancement, full-time education and other courses. People may not be aware of those benefits.

How does the lack of corporate governance and the shortage of middle management of which the representatives have spoken affect the members and the levels of stress or risk that they are put under? As Commandant King mentioned, it increases the chance of mistakes. These are very serious situations and we cannot afford mistakes.

What are the implications of low numbers in the Defence Forces? When the air ambulance was a pilot scheme I fought very hard for it to be maintained in Custume Barracks in Athlone and I would hate to see anything happen to it. In light of the level of difficulties in respect of Air Corps pilots, what is the danger of that service ceasing?

On the White Paper on Defence, I was elected to the Dáil in a by-election in 2014 and attended the symposium in Farmleigh on the White Paper. I was full of the joys of life having heard the role of the Defence Forces in the following ten years being talked up. I felt very positive coming out Farmleigh that day thinking everything was going to be great. It was never intended to be a box-ticking exercise but, rather, an attempt to do the right thing. Has there been any tangible delivery from the White Paper?

If there were three things the committee could do or lobby for on behalf of RACO, what would they be?

Mr. Conor King: I will address Deputy Grealish’s questions first and then answer those asked by Senator McFadden.

There is no doubt that the relationship between the Department of Defence and the representative organisations is a difficult one. I touched on that in my opening statement. There is an obsession with control and micromanagement in the Department. We are of the firm opinion that military advice is not heeded by it. This makes it difficult to conduct our business in terms of the conciliation and arbitration process. There is a significant communication difficulty in terms of receiving written communication and replies. There is a difference of opinion regarding our members’ right to representation under Defence Force Regulation S6. On many occasions, the Department has sought to use that regulation to deny our legitimacy as a representative association. If we cannot represent our members under Defence Forces regulations, what is the alternative?

Deputy Grealish asked whether senior officers are doing what they should be doing. We are all leaders in the Defence Forces and it is incumbent on us to do the best we can with the resources we have. That is our responsibility. However, when a unit commander is given less than 50% of the resources required, it is impossible to do the job to the excellent level he or she was trained to do.

As serving members of the Defence Forces, my colleagues and I are apolitical. It would not be right or proper for me to comment on the level of confidence in an official or elected representative. However, I can say that there is an unprecedented retention crisis in the Defence Forces. At the current turnover rate of 9% and the unprecedented and unsustainable levels of induction training, the Defence Forces will not reach the authorised strength of 9,500 personnel in all ranks until 2035.

It is apparent to me that the emergency aeromedical service is rightly recognised as an excellent and vital service for rural Ireland, the midlands and the rest of the country. One must remember that it is staffed by one EAS crew on a 24-hour basis. There are two 24-hour crews in the Air Corps, with the other being the Garda air support unit. They are all that we can manage. We would love to have ten emergency aeromedical service crews and ten Garda air support unit crews, but we just do not have the resources. I think I have spelled out to the committee the retention difficulties in the helicopter wing of the Air Corps facility in Baldonnel and the implications of those difficulties for service delivery. It is not for me to say whether that operation is under threat.

It says a lot that the Naval Service has a 14% turnover rate. According to the UK Ministry of Defence, a turnover rate of 5% represents a crisis. There are nine ships in the Naval Service at the moment, but the service has enough crew members for just seven of those ships. Able seamen are at 50% strength in station in the Naval Service. Able mechanics are at 46% strength in station, communications operatives are at 50% strength in station, and cooks are at 70% strength in station. The diving section, which is rightly lauded for its bravery in the operations it conducts, is at 33% strength in station. Lieutenant Naval Service marine engineering officers are vital for the safe operation of Naval Service patrol vessels. In April 2019, the effective strength for these officers was 36%. Obviously, these shortfalls have knock-on effects on morale, governance, mentoring and supervision within the Naval Service. It is no wonder that the Naval Service has such a high turnover when its members are being asked to shoulder this burden every day.

I will explain how this has affected people on the ground, or on the waves as we would say. It has an impact on operational capability in the maintenance of ships, boat cranes and armaments, etc. Everybody relies on the Naval Service operations command's stated policy of two years in, two years out. Families plan on that basis and lives are built around it in the Naval Service. Personnel are now finding that they have to apply to come ashore after their two years are up. As the available number of such reliefs is limited for obvious reasons, not all personnel are facilitated in coming ashore. What does that say for morale? What does it say for hope for the future? What does it say for the maintenance of proper family life? The implementation of the working time directive would focus minds in the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence as people reflect on how Naval Service operations can be safely operated. I remind the committee that the Naval Service patrols an area 12 times the size of the country itself. We are not resourcing this service properly.

I want to speak briefly about family income supplement, or the working family payment as it is now known. We are not the competent authority when it comes to social welfare. I think

the Minister has reported that “only” 90 people in the Defence Forces are in receipt of family income supplement. One is too many. The loyal servants of this State should not need to have their incomes supplemented by social welfare. I cannot make that point more clearly. There should not be any more talk about “only” 90 people needing this assistance. The number of Defence Forces personnel who could be eligible for family income supplement or working family payment has not been reported. Obviously, it depends on how many dependants one has. According to an analysis that has been done of cases in which the member of the Defence Forces is the only earner in the family - the rate of postings away from home that military personnel have to deal with means they are often the only earners in the family - up to 1,700 people in the Defence Forces could be eligible for family income supplement or working family payment. In many cases, their spouses cannot be earners because they are looking after the children and dependants. As the Minister has rightly said, working family payment is a matter between the individual and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. I cannot comment on the accuracy of the 90 figure that has been cited, but I can say that it should be zero.

Deputy Grealish asked how we envisage a Defence Forces pay review body would operate. My colleague, Lieutenant Colonel Priestley, spoke at length on this issue at one of our conferences. As he is an expert on the matter, I ask him to give the committee his perspective on it.

Mr. Derek Priestley: I will respond to Deputy Grealish’s question about whether we are being treated fairly by referring to my experience over the past five years as a full-time official with RACO. When one goes into national pay talks and is left sitting in the corridor for three weeks, it is very hard for one to feel one is being treated fairly. We want an opportunity to put forward the concerns of our members about pay or allowances. An overwhelming percentage of the members of ICTU are in that environment. We are meant to be in a parallel process, but the reality is that we are not. At our first outing, we experienced being the last people to leave the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, and turn off the lights without having received a fair hearing. At our second outing, which was during Lansdowne Road 2, it was decided on the second day to allow the representative associations, including gardaí, into the main room. Our voice is not heard because we do not enjoy full status and we do not have industrial relations behind us. As an association, we represent 1,200 people. PDFORRA probably represents 7,000 people. I am not quite sure what the figure for the Garda is. The uniqueness of military service is not recognised in the context of our ability to come forward and speak. I will clarify our experience of national pay talks. It may appear on the face of it that we received fair treatment, but the reality was very different. Although we were allowed into the main room the second time out, we were nobodies. We accept that, by the way. Officers are particularly accepting of the role they play in society and the duties they take on voluntarily.

We did some research in advance of one of our conferences in November 2017. We looked at how other militaries are treated. We identified a statutory pay review body in the UK that was specific to this sector. It was one of eight such bodies that existed across the UK public sector. We were interested to note that it is a full-time committee which sits annually and has access to the highest levels of Government, including the UK Ministry of Defence and its general staff, and of course all the members of the armed services in the UK. The committee engages with all of these interests annually. It also has access to relevant data. The big thing we are talking about today is retention. The committee knows where the pressure points exist in terms of recruitment and retention, which allows action to be taken when the figures fall below a certain level. If recruitment and retention fail to such an extent that the UK armed forces loses 2% of their designed strength, there is an immediate move to address the situation. We are talking about trained personnel, rather than new entrants, cadets or newly inducted people. The com-

mittee recommended to the UK Government that allowances should be adjusted upwards or downwards depending on the specific circumstances. Members might think this is a great deal for the representative associations on the basis that they get what they want, but all of this is done within the parameters of the UK Government's national pay policy. At the end of the day, this is controlled by the UK Government, which is aware of the uniqueness of military service and the position of the armed forces.

We have targeted the idea of a pay review body as a way forward. We are cognisant that we are speaking at a time when a report from the Public Service Pay Commission is pending. As an association, we put a great effort into our first submission to the first report of the Public Service Pay Commission. We were heartened that the Defence Forces, RACO and PDFORRA were mentioned throughout the report and that the commission was directed to examine the issue of recruitment and retention in the HSE and related areas as well as in the Defence Forces. Two and a half years on, we are still waiting for the report of that examination to go to the Government. We have no idea what would come out of such a report. We are all aware of the leaks that have come with this process. If what is being reported is true, we would be very disappointed, especially after all our effort. We are absolutely in favour of a pay review body. I am speaking on behalf of the membership when I say I do not think members feel they are being treated fairly. I think we can prove that with the statistics that have frequently been mentioned by Commandant King. There is an opportunity to do the right thing here. We have been calling for this for two and a half years. We are not critical of the Public Service Pay Commission, which has followed its terms of reference quite closely. It is time for action on this side of the House.

Mr. Conor King: First, I thank Senator McFadden for her kind words on the respect and loyalty which we endeavour to show to the Government but mainly to the citizens of Ireland. We firmly believe that we serve the State and do so without fear or favour. The Senator mentioned the positives and we do not want to be negative. We love the Defence Forces and that is the reason we are in this job.

Deputy Jack Chambers mentioned Commandant Berry. He left because he loved the Defence Forces and could not make a difference in the current climate. Make no mistake, there are great positives in the Defence Forces. I will ask the president of the association to talk about those positives in terms of what it means to be not only an officer but a member of Óglaigh na hÉireann.

Mr. Shane Keogh: I thank the Deputy for the question. At the outset, I thank the committee, on behalf of my members, as president of the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, who are very appreciative of this opportunity to air some of their concerns, as there is much frustration at present.

On the question of positives, there undoubtedly are many positives associated with a career in the Defence Forces. It plays out very well, because we are still effectively recruiting. We are enticing people in because there are many things to focus on in the Defence Forces. When one is inducted initially, we train one to become a soldier, sailor, airman or airwoman, but there are numerous opportunities thereafter to become an engineer, an air traffic controller, a member of the special forces, a doctor or a lawyer. That is to be and is encouraged and we facilitate such training internally because we are a micro-community. We have to do everything ourselves. When we deploy overseas, we have to provide all the services internally. There is a need for all of that training. Our training resources, however, are at capacity, which is something that must be realised.

There are internal opportunities also in terms of overseas service. It is an exciting job when one sells it to a civilian at the point of induction.

The issue is not the job, which is fantastic and which everybody in the Defence Forces loves. That is shown through the University of Limerick, UL, research. People want to stay in the Defence Forces, it is just that they feel that they cannot. Recruitment is not the issue; it is retention. We are harping back, unfortunately, on retention because that is the issue.

The members are extremely loyal to the State and will always remain loyal to the State and they want to stay. We have to provide the environment to them in order that they can stay.

Mr. Conor King: I thank Commandant Keogh. The Senator about three things as a wish list. A number of things are required.

The first and the most short-term thing is that there is an ongoing Public Service Pay Commission and it has to deliver. A 10% increase of military service allowance, MSA, will not do the trick and in fact we fear will act as a catalyst for future departures. I ask members to look at the unique nature of military service and at our refusal to withdraw labour, and recognise the fact that we are loyal to the State and treat us fairly. There is scope, without breaking any public service stability agreements, to look after the Defence Forces. That is our first ask.

The second ask, which ties into the Public Service Pay Commission to one extent in that it is included in our submissions, is that there are various retention initiatives that could be reinstated or introduced in the Defence Forces, in terms of fixed-period promotion. More crucially, for all post-2013 new entrants, I ask that the single pension scheme be looked at, and at the fact that a viable long-term career is not being provided for post-2013 new entrants. The Amárach research survey told us specifically that cadets are cognisant now of the fact this is no longer a long-term career in the Defence Forces. We cannot go to market to recruit a captain or a sergeant. They are deciding that they are going to join, get everything they can out of the Defence Forces in the short term, and come their mid to late 30s, it will be decision time. If they know that they are going to be forcibly retired at the age of 54 for a captain, or 58 for a commandant, and have to wait ten years for the contributory State pension - the old-age pension as it was - why would they stay? We have to incentivise people to stay in the Defence Forces.

The last two things are larger strategic issues. We spoke about the Defence Forces pay review body. Our place is not at pay talks. We have learned that. An independent standing Defence Forces pay review body, which constantly sits and examines the resources available to the Defence Forces as to accommodation, pay, allowances, remuneration, mobility and commuting distances etc., which compensates members for that and which looks after the State, is needed. In the United Kingdom, the Armed Forces Covenant and the Ministry of Defence recognise the unique nature of UK military service and pledge to look after them and to treat their families and the service men and women fairly. Could we see that from our own Department at the moment?

Finally, we have spoken of a root and branch review of Defence Forces remuneration and conditions of service. The last review undertaken was in 1990. If I can draw an analogy to 1990, when I was ten years of age, I am told that at the time, wives and partners were on the streets because the Defence Forces could not stick up for themselves. Does that sound familiar?

Let us please have another look at how we constitute our Defence Forces and at the relationship between military management, the Department of Defence, the representative associations,

and the loyal men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann.

These are the asks. They may sound like a great number but they are within the gift of the Government to provide, if it is serious about treating the Defence Forces fairly.

Chairman: I thank Commandant King. I call Deputy Ó Snodaigh and then Senator Craughwell.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach.

Earlier this week Cathal Berry, who I am told is in attendance in the audience, did a tremendously brave thing for someone who has left the Defence Forces when he spoke up for them. One would not usually expect what he said from a former member. I have met quite a number of members in recent years at RACO conferences I have attended or in my work as a defence spokesperson for my Party. Each and every one has expressed a frustration that came out in the words that were issued by Cathal Berry during the week, when he talked about the Department's treating of members with contempt and of the Defence Forces being dismantled and demoralised. This also came across in the comments of the witnesses today. It is a frustration I can understand. Commandant King stated:

The Department's approach to representation has been divisive, dismissive and, sometimes, subversive. This has led to an adversarial and dysfunctional industrial relations climate.

That is a very serious charge, which Commandant King has backed up in chapter and verse which is the key part, even in his last comment where he referred to the last review of pay conditions in the Defence Forces taking place in 1990.

One question he put to us earlier was to ask who was batting for the Defence Forces. I know from attending this meeting that each and every one of us has the interests of the Defence Forces at heart, are trying to help and are batting for the Defence Forces. I hope that we will be able to assist and that this appearance by the witnesses before the committee today will get the coverage it deserves and will add to the sense of crisis. I have been talking to people concerned and some of the figures outlined by Commandant King are very stark. He said that 87% of the Defence Forces earn well below the public sector wage. In our briefing from the Department of Defence, we were given a different take on that. Commandant King's comment on this take was something similar to his reference to this dismissive attitude, whereby somebody has to be the low-paid. The Department of Defence in a briefing stated, with reference to the starting pay details, the pay compared with other jobs with similar entry-level criteria in the public service. That fails to understand Commandant King's final point regarding the uniqueness of the Defence Forces. It is quite clear and stark. Personnel cannot do overtime, they are on 24-hour call and he listed the duties. It is not a normal job and is not similar to any other job in the public service, albeit perhaps, An Garda Síochána, but gardaí can do overtime. That is key.

In this day and age, the retirement age in a world where people are living longer and in the main, people are fitter, has increased. I wish I was as fit as half of the officers who are retiring from the Defence Forces, aged 47 or 52 in this day and age. Somebody needs to get real.

When there is a crisis, action is needed. Commandant King mentioned the White Paper. My big criticism of the White Paper was that there were no timelines. Whatever about having 88 particular actions, unless one has timelines, it is difficult to manage so that feeds into the

system.

It was mentioned how low the number of officers has fallen to in some sections of the Defence Forces. The Department of Defence told us that there are 45 fewer officers in the Air Corps. The establishment figure is 166 but there are only 141 in the Air Corps. That is very stark. We know the consequences of that. I know from dealing with a number of personnel that the stress levels are increasing due to the double and treble jobbing of officers. The briefing material also highlights that sick leave in the Defence Force is increasing. If somebody is working two and three jobs, something has to give. I am concerned that the officer level of the ordnance section is at 16% -----

Mr. Conor King: In one particular area.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: That is scary. This section needs 100%, given how dangerous the role is.

Commandant King mentioned the Naval Service, which has similar low numbers. If ships that were tied up because they did not have officers leave shore and drop anchor because some personnel have been sent to them to make up the numbers so that they can leave port, that suggests a crisis. I do not believe it is taken seriously by the Department. What can we do or the public do to impress on the Department and the Minister, who is the Taoiseach, albeit the Minister of State at the Department, Deputy Kehoe, should know that this is at breaking point? If it continues at the current rate, the Defence Forces will end up not being able to deliver on much of its work and duties as an aid to the civil power and in crisis management when there is a humanitarian disaster, floods, or fires as we have witnessed recently in County Donegal and elsewhere. The Defence Forces do not have the personnel to help out, even though they want to. Where is the point of no return? There is a significant volume of information. I compliment the witnesses on how well they have presented the issues and how stark they are.

I differ with them regarding the approach to trade union rights, but anything is better than the current situation where the representative associations cannot sit down and be heard and the information acted upon. I would be more inclined that personnel should have full trade union rights, as has happened in other countries.

I asked a question at the conference that addressed the working time directive and where it was demonstrated how it worked in other countries. Given the present crisis, could the directive be implemented in the Defence Forces or would we have to wait for full establishment numbers, given the shortfalls that have been highlighted?

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I address Commandant Keogh, Commandant King and Lieutenant Colonel Priestley by their rank because together they represent more than 60 years experience as leaders in the Defence Forces. They come before us with no mean credentials. It is an unique step they have taken to come here and I am delighted they are present.

I made a complaint some time ago when the Department of Defence sought the appointment of an additional assistant secretary general. That appointment was specifically a "people's appointment". I want to know who sets HR policy? Is it the Department, the Minister, the Secretary General of the Department or the Defence Forces themselves? Is it correct that no operational unit has been visited by the newly appointed assistant secretary general for people? Is it correct that the UK Ministry of Defence report annually on the serviceable numbers they have, excluding those in training, and that they report to Parliament on that? Is it true that the

ordinance corps is still recovering from the removal of fixed promotion? I would like to know whether RACO submitted a complaint to the oversight committee on public service pay, and if it has, whether it has had a response. Why does the organisation think nurses, teachers and An Garda Síochána can make a submission to the oversight committee and seem to get an immediate response and a significant public response?

Commandant King adverted to the helicopter side of the Air Corps. I recently learned only two helicopters are available - one is the AES in Athlone and the second is on standby -and that because of the lack of technical support a number of our aircraft are grounded. I do not ask him to confirm or deny this other than to give factual information with respect to the availability of fixed wing or helicopter appliances. He will understand that Air Corps pilots are required to maintain their flying hours. Are their flying hours being impeded as a result of the lack of aircraft? I do not want him to go into the operational side. Are pilots sitting on the ground with no aircraft to fly because of the lack of technical personnel?

An issue of deep concern to me, to which Commandant King adverted, is the fact that there is only one captain out of eight in Finner Camp. Not long ago, one captain and a number of lieutenants ran a battalion, a second lieutenant was in charge of three platoons, and a second lieutenant acted as adjutant. He referred to the experience required in those roles. I am deeply concerned that a second lieutenant will find himself in serious trouble as a result of an accident through no fault of his or her own purely because of lack of experience. I would like Commandant King to address the legal aspect of junior leaders undertaking roles that were designed for senior leaders. The Defence Forces has a strong record of standing up to the plate when called on to do so, but are we asking people to take on roles that are way above their pay grade? In taking on those roles, I am mindful of the annual appraisal of soldiers. A second lieutenant is parachuted into a unit for a couple of weeks and he or she is asked to complete appraisals of soldiers he or she has never known. Those appraisals may impact on the career of those soldiers over time. It is only a matter of time before the Defence Forces finds themselves before a High Court judge explaining why some person was denied promotion or denied service overseas because of an appraisal by somebody who did not know him or her.

When the Department of Defence provides information on salaries and related matters, the words “excluding overseas service” are always included. Is such service now to be factored into the income of soldiers, sailors and air crew? In other words, will we be depending on United Nations service or service elsewhere to bolster salaries for our service personnel in order that they can survive?

Finally, as our guests may be aware, I am a veteran of two armies. One of those armies will look after me until the day I die. I have a badge to put on my collar and I can go to the UK and walk into any museum or public service area and be treated with the utmost respect. For the rest of my life, I can turn to the armed forces charity, SSAFA, if I find myself in trouble from a welfare perspective. Here in this country, we do not provide the same level of respect and gratitude for service. I am not asking our guests to comment to any great degree on that point, but I would be interested in their views.

Mr. Conor King: I thank members for their questions. Deputy Ó Snodaigh asked about the approach to representation. I covered that in some detail earlier and the Deputy elaborated on and echoed my comments. An issue that is worth highlighting is the attitude we meet and the dealings we sometimes have with our counterparts in the Department of Defence. The Deputy spoke about retirement ages in a context where people are living longer. That is essentially our problem with the single pension scheme, that we are forced to retire early without being provid-

ed for in retirement. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform commenced a process in August 2016 to examine retirement ages, which involved asking all uniformed services as well as all other public sector bodies, including the Department of Defence, for their input. It is worth noting that it was not military management but the Department that was surveyed. The reason for this, as the then Minister outlined in 2017, was that the State pension age was going up from 65 to 66, and woe betide anybody who had to retire at 65 and wait a full year for their old age pension. When it came to the question of retirement ages for military personnel, the Department of Defence declined to be included in the review, undertaking instead to conduct its own review. That was in early 2017 and it is on the record. Two years later, despite many requests for such a review of mandatory retirement ages, it has not commenced. That says a great deal about the concern which has been expressed for military personnel by the Department.

The Deputy asked how we can show that things are at breaking point. Two years ago at our conference, Commandant Keogh, who was then RACO president, stated, to the great dismay of military management and, in particular, the Department of Defence, that we were in a state of crisis. When we gave our first submission to the Public Service Pay Commission in early 2018, the turnover rate was approximately 7.5%. When we finally got to submit an oral representation to the commission in March of this year, it had increased to 8.1%. The turnover rate is now at 9% and I do not know what it will be six months from now. It is not an exaggeration to say that there are soldiers, sailors and air crew in Óglaigh na hÉireann who are living on the bread line. Having watched what the Public Service Pay Commission is doing, they have decided in their heads that they are going but are still looking for a reason to stay. That is the loyalty they display towards Óglaigh na hÉireann. They do not want to leave but they might have to do so. We have reached breaking point and are beyond it. We must step back from the brink at this stage.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh asked about the health and safety provisions of the working time directive. I spoke briefly about that, and it is an extremely important point. Lieutenant Colonel Priestley might elaborate on the health and safety aspect, the directive's potential as a retention tool and the difficulties the Deputy outlined. The underlying problem is that the manning level shortages are so great that there is uncertainty as to how the working time provisions could even be introduced in the Defence Forces. That should not be the main consideration but, in reality, it is.

Mr. Derek Priestley: The important point about the working time directive is its health and safety focus. The Defence Forces are currently exempted from the provisions under section 3 of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997. It is a blanket exemption. Various legal cases both at home and in Europe have resulted in a widespread recognition that something must be done in regard to the Organisation of Working Time Act, after which the provisions set out in the directive will then have to be reincorporated into Irish law. As to what is required, it is about providing rest periods for personnel who currently have a 24-7 liability, as we outlined. It is about being able to say in a working week how many hours personnel will work. We need to be able to define the working day, the working week and the working month for Defence Forces members. The provision in the Act that workers must have 11 hours off in a day does not necessarily sit well with military operations, so we are into the realm of exemptions and derogations and the question of what that means for Defence Forces personnel. Since 2014 or thereabouts, we have been calling for some type of examination of the issue, but any progress has been slow in coming. There is a huge body of work involved. Garda Síochána representatives took five years to come up with an agreement for their members. It is only recently that we have had serious discussions with the Department of Defence and military management as

to how we might implement the directive within the Defence Forces. It is an issue that is crying out to be tackled if we are to address all the difficulties we are facing in regard to health and safety, retention and so on.

We cannot delay any longer. In response to the surveys that were conducted, 16% of Defence Forces members said they were stressed. That cannot be a healthy situation. We have ordnance officers who are doing seven 24-hour duties in a row. They commence on a Friday at 11.30 a.m. and finish the following Friday at 11.30 p.m. It is only quite a recent thing that they are not expected to come back to work on the Monday. After meeting great resistance, we managed to push it back to Wednesday. What kind of work-life balance can anybody have in those circumstances? These are highly skilled and trained personnel who took a long time to develop their skills and are recognised internationally as world leaders in their trade. Yet we wonder why they are running out the door. I could give a long list of the jobs for which experienced ordnance officers have left the Defence Forces, but what is the point? The only point that matters is they left, although the removal of fixed-period promotions, to which the Senator referred, certainly was a catalyst for many of them. I spoke not long ago to a man who had left for a large organisation where he was still required to do 24-hour shifts but could not believe the amount of time he got off after doing those stints. He was at a loss as to what to do with the time off he had. One cannot blame people for leaving in that situation.

The review of the working time legislation is a significant body of work which has been delayed for far too long. We have been trying to progress it and it is time now for it to be done. Members who wish to be helpful should be mindful of the need for that legislative work.

Mr. Conor King: Senator Craughwell spoke about the appointment of an assistant secretary general in the Department of Defence with specific responsibility for Defence Forces Personnel. I do not want to personalise our discussion by referring to any particular individual. If the Senator says that the person in question has not visited the barracks, I will take his word for it. I can say that we certainly have not had much contact with the assistant secretary general. I had one meeting with him in the six months since I took over as general secretary. I am not sure how many meetings Lieutenant Colonel Priestley had while in the role.

Mr. Derek Priestley: I had one meeting with him in five years.

Mr. Conor King: That is all I want to say about the matter.

The UK Ministry of Defence reports annually on manning levels and strengths, which is what one expects to see in a democracy. However, the key point, as the Senator identified, is that it reports on trained strength and does not include 500 recruits or cadets in the figures. The Irish public are starting to realise that when the Defence Forces are described as having an establishment of 9,500 and a strength of 8,750, I am surmising that 500 or 600 cadets or recruits must be taken away from that. There are also personnel overseas, on leave of absence, on secondment and on sick leave etc. Therefore, we need to understand what strength at station is and we have painted a clear enough picture.

I am not personally aware of the specific number of helicopters available to the Air Corps. If there are only two available to the Air Corps then that is a dire situation. I am not qualified to comment on that as I do not have the figures to hand but what I can say is that Air Corps cadetships are now taking almost five years due to a lack of aircraft.

The Senator spoke about governance and I have covered governance and mentoring but I

would like to paint another picture of governance and I ask Mr. Keogh to do that as president of RACO and to talk about supervision, mentoring, the work-life balance etc. that are affecting the line units in the Defence Forces.

Mr. Shane Keogh: We have been talking about how loyal the officers of the Defence Forces are. Cathal Berry was mentioned earlier on and he had to leave because he could not do anything internally and that is a strange dichotomy. What is happening on the ground is that there are many gaps at officer level for the reasons to which Mr. King has alluded. The establishment for overseas personnel and the number of people in training are not catered for within the unit strengths so there are day to day gaps in every unit in the Defence Forces.

The net effect of that is that those who remain there are carrying the extra burden. They are well trained, they that take that task on well and the young officers out there are doing a fantastic job but they can only do so much. One job can be done well and two jobs can be done but when one gets a third job and a fourth job, it is hard to keep up. That leaves huge issues with governance and it leaves significant issues with risk. The difficulty is that the risk lies on the shoulders of those young officers and the NCOs. That frustration has come home to roost with the numbers leaving the Defence Forces. I hope that can paint some picture of governance and risk at the unit level, which is what it is really about because they are at the true coalface of our organisation.

Mr. Conor King: To double up on the governance and risk issue and to also mention the importance of hanging on to suitably qualified and experienced personnel, the Air Corps sought to bring in an expert to talk to it about the difficulties it was undergoing in January 2017. It brought in a gentleman who was a Queen's Counsel, Sir Charles Haddon-Cave. He was the author of the report entitled "The Loss of RAF Nimrod XV230", which was subtitled "A Failure of Leadership, Culture and Priorities". He appealed to Air Corps management and Defence Forces management to treasure and hold on to suitably qualified and experienced personnel, SQEPs, which is a recognised term in business, in order to retain critical capabilities, including specialised management functions associated with military aviation.

According to our Air Corps colleagues, unfortunately, experience takes years to build but can be lost instantly and when experienced personnel are leaving faster than they can be replaced, the burden of safe operations falls on fewer shoulders and this risks overtasking, burn-out and overstretch. Society expects military personnel to just get on with the job, to meet any demands and to achieve the mission and we really try to do that. We have an ethos of meeting the demands and of not saying "No", but without sufficient qualified and experienced personnel this leads to a potentially dangerous ethos of can-do, make-do, muddle through as referred to by Sir Charles Haddon-Cave. I will leave it at that with the governance issues but members can see that we have been talking about this for a while. The Air Corps brought this gentleman in in 2017.

A University of Limerick focus group report in 2017 stated "Serious concerns from an organisational level are presented here" and the Defence Forces are "reaching a point of being hollowed out in terms of experienced human capital, that notwithstanding the increased recruitment of cadets it would take 10 plus years to replace the expertise that has been lost". That was in 2017 and we are far worse now. The report went on to state:

Officers have expressed that management's focus on recruitment rather than retention is their primary source of stress. This has led to having higher numbers of inexperienced members while those with sufficient experience and capability are leaving. The workload is

increasing and there are fewer members to do the work, so this has led to an inability to meet demand to the standard required. Members are feeling overworked and Officers fear for the safety of their members and the capability of performing to the best possible standard.

That was in 2017. Since the publication of this report, no new policy initiatives have been introduced by management to address the underlying issues identified by the University of Limerick researchers.

To go back to the Gleeson commission, I want to draw an analogy to the position in 1990. The commission report stated at paragraph 3.7.10 that “one factor which must be taken into account is a need to arrive at rates of pay which are sufficient to enable the Defence Forces to recruit and retain personnel of the proper quality”. It sounds like common sense and the report went on to state:

To ignore identifiable problems of recruitment would be to run the risk that the Defence Forces would be unable to secure the services of sufficient numbers of suitable personnel. To ignore clear evidence of retention difficulties would lead to out-flows of skilled personnel. In either event, the capacity of the Defence Forces to carry out the tasks assigned to them could be undermined and the problems created would take many years to remedy.

This finding is particularly relevant as the retention of commissioned officers continues to be a major challenge for the Defence Forces. That was in 1990, almost 30 years ago and here we are again. The Senator asked about HR policy. I will ask Mr. Priestley to tackle that one.

Mr. Derek Priestley: I thank the Senator again for his quick-fire questions, specifically on the notion of an overriding HR policy. The only thing I can say about it is that in 2014 when I first came into this job I sought out a HR policy to read into and brief myself on, to sadly be told that none existed.

The Senator then linked to the White Paper. It identified 27 projects that we feel have an industrial relations or human resources aspect to them. When we go and seek information about that to see how it is progressing and how it is getting on, the information available to us to comment on, to get involved in or to influence is very limited. The phrase “transitioned to normal business” was used earlier. What does that mean? What is the product? What do we look to for guidance? Where is the retention policy? We simply do not know and we cannot comment any further. That is the quick-fire answer to that.

Mr. Conor King: I spoke about suitably qualified and experienced personnel earlier and the Air Corps cannot fly without air traffic control. We all know and recognise that. Dublin Airport does not operate without its air traffic controllers who are highly skilled, highly qualified and expensively qualified personnel. Air traffic control is at 66% for officers and 50% for non-commissioned officers. They carry out the same function and they are all air traffic controllers. In December 2016, the 24-hour air traffic control service in Baldonnel was reduced to an 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. service. Since January 2018 it is back up to 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. but it is no longer a 24 hour service. At night, a fireman sits in the tower. There are no air traffic controllers at night. The Garda air support unit depends on Dublin Airport to fly in and out and air traffic controllers are only on call at the weekends. There is no dedicated air traffic control service at the weekends because of a lack of resources, not because of a lack of will.

Personnel do depend on UN service to supplement their incomes. That is a fact. Are there any other questions that I have missed?

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: There was a question about the legal responsibility of leaders in the field where there are young officers taking on several roles, for example.

Mr. Conor King: The president of RACO is a legal officer so I might defer to Mr. Keogh's knowledge.

Mr. Shane Keogh: I have touched on it. The reality is we are the leaders of the organisation and have a responsibility to look after our troops. That is from where the frustration stems. People want to do their job properly. They want to be able to sit down and produce an annual report knowing the individual very well. Unfortunately, in some units that is not the case because the turnover rate is such that young officers go overseas to a different unit or a training institution before they have had an opportunity to build up an appropriate relationship with their subordinates. I do not want to go too far into the operational sphere, but the reality is this impinges on the well-being of young officers. We are putting all of this responsibility on their shoulders without giving them appropriate backup support.

The working time directive is law. That we have an exemption under the 1997 Act does not give us a pass. That has been established in the European courts. We are in flagrant breach of the directive. It is a requirement to implement it, not because soldiers need more time off but from a health and safety perspective. We must give them an appropriate amount of time off, which they deserve because they are working hours that in many cases are not nine-to-five. There are many 24-hour duties. People could be on exercises for up to one week or even overseas for six months to one year. It is not a standard employ. We must come up with suitable solutions to maintain the health and safety benefits for all of our soldiers, sailors and air crew.

Senator Terry Leyden: I thank the Chairman for giving me the opportunity to speak. I am Vice Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs and not a member of this committee. I commiserate with the Chairman on not being elected to the European Parliament on this occasion, but, frankly, its loss is Ireland's gain. I commend him for being here after such a gruelling election campaign.

I welcome the delegation from RACO which includes its general secretary, Commandant Conor King, who has replaced Lieutenant Colonel Earnán Naughton; its deputy general secretary, Lieutenant Colonel Derek Priestley; and its president, Commandant Shane Keogh. I also welcome Cathal Berry who is in the Visitors Gallery and has made a great contribution by highlighting various issues. This is a wonderful opportunity for them to highlight what is happening in the Defence Forces, given that the proceedings are being televised nationally and internationally. I hope the Minister of State is watching very carefully. I also know that officials in the Department are watching very carefully and analysing what the delegates are saying. I ask them to please listen to the delegates' contributions and take action.

I am here because the Irish Conference of Professional and Service Associations, of which RACO, PDFORRA and the Garda representative associations are members, is a nominating body for Members on the Labour Panel in the Seanad. I have been a Member of the Seanad for 17 years as a nominee of the organisation. In those years I have never come across such discontent and concern among members of RACO and PDFORRA as I have seen in the past few years. Deputy Seán Barrett who was an excellent Minister for Defence is here. However, there is now no Minister for Defence in the Cabinet. The Taoiseach has other national duties to perform and cannot give the time required to the Defence Forces. The Minister of State does not have a vote at the Cabinet table. Although he sits at the Cabinet table, he cannot get involved. I had hoped Deputy Seán Barrett would make this point. I hope Deputy Jack Chambers will

take on the job of Minister for Defence in not too distant future and that the incoming Government will have a full-time Minister for Defence. It is very important that there be a Minister for Defence.

I commend the delegation on its contribution. I will not go back over what has been said about the number of personnel. The delegates made the case very well. Is restoration of the 4th Western Brigade at Custume Barracks in Athlone a realistic proposition having regard to the fact that the Defence Forces are not at full strength? In that context, on 4 April 2017 a motion was moved in the Dáil by Deputy Lisa Chambers, the then Fianna Fáil spokesperson on defence. What are the chances of it happening? I commend other spokespersons who have spoken about the issue.

A total of €3 billion is being dedicated to broadband provision. There is no doubt that broadband is needed but it will not help to fly planes or protect our coastline or fisheries. However, the Government has no difficulty in awarding a dodgy contract worth €3 billion and neglecting the people who defend us. If I had the choice of having broadband in my house or having the Army look after our interests, I know what I would vote for.

Chairman: I thank the Senator. Does Commandant King wish to speak? We are not discussing broadband provision.

Mr. Conor King: That is fine.

Senator Terry Leyden: I was comparing the priorities of the Government. The Army is not a priority. That is the point I was making.

Chairman: The Senator has made the point very well.

Mr. Conor King: I presume the Defence Forces would benefit from the appointment of a senior Minister. They could not but benefit from such a move, but that is a matter for the Government.

Is restoration of the 4th Western Brigade a realistic proposition? Yes, if it was to be done properly, but we need to be at full strength before it happens. We require strength in the Defence Forces to carry out our assigned tasks. That is part of the reason a root and branch review of what the Government wants us to do in the Defence Forces for the State should be conducted. When it decides what it wants us to do, it should resource us properly and we will do it for it.

To reply to the question as to whether restoration of the 4th Western Brigade is a realistic proposition, it is extremely difficult to recruit, attract and retain people west of the River Shannon because of the uncertainty; the long commuting distances involved; the frequency of posting - it is eight in five years for senior officers; and the distances from home. The effects on work-life balance for officers in the former 4th Western Brigade who have not yet left are certainly stark. There was a large outflow of personnel in 2012. Well over 50% of the outflow were personnel from the former 4th Western Brigade because they did not see a future in commuting to the far reaches of the country. We must do it properly. I am not sure whether the reorganisation in 2012 was done properly. I am not really qualified to comment any further. Have I answered the Senator's question?

Senator Terry Leyden: Yes, very satisfactorily.

Chairman: I thank Commandant King. Some months ago the Chief of Staff appeared be-

fore us and was as forthcoming as it was possible for him to be. Obviously, he did not enter into the political realm, something we fully understand, but he was very forthcoming. As Commandant King is aware, the Garda Commissioner is the Accounting Officer for An Garda Síochána, whereas the Chief of Staff is not the Accounting Officer for the Defence Forces. Has that matter ever been discussed? Perhaps it is unfair of me to ask that question, but have the benefits that could accrue from the Chief of Staff being the Accounting Officer for the Defence Forces been discussed among Defence Forces personnel? Commandant King is aware that Accounting Officers appear before committees.

Mr. Conor King: I am.

Chairman: When the Chief of Staff appeared before us, I presume it was the first time a Chief of Staff had ever appeared before an Oireachtas committee. When we requested him to attend, he readily agreed to accept our invitation. I express our appreciation to him for his engagement with the committee. All of my colleagues attended the meeting and engaged constructively with him. He indicated to us that he would like to engage further in the future. Have the benefits that could accrue from the Chief of Staff being the Accounting Officer for the Defence Forces been discussed within the Defence Forces? I do not have a problem if Commandant King is uncomfortable dealing with that question.

Mr. Conor King: I am not uncomfortable with that question. There is no doubt the military authorities are uniquely placed to provide military advice to the Government. If a military specific operational budget was to be allocated to the Chief of Staff, I would see that person as being the competent authority to decide how that money would be spent. It would have to be done properly. It would have to be resourced and a proper staff complement would be required to supplement the Accounting Officer. I am not sure if comparable military organisations have their chief of defence as the Accounting Officer. The Commissioner of An Garda Síochána is the Accounting Officer and I am sure that gives him more freedom in how to allocate his resources, but again, that is a matter for the Government. It was heartening to see the Chief of Staff before this Oireachtas committee. I am not sure if the Chairman asked him if he wanted to be the Accounting Officer, and if so, I do not know what his response was.

Chairman: To be fair, most people would take on more responsibilities if they could, so I did not ask him.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I wish to make two brief points, one concerning the Chief of Staff. We must acknowledge that at the PDFORRA conference he did something that I believe no previous Chief of Staff has done. He stepped outside and placed his cards firmly on the table, and short of doing what Commandant Berry has done in placing his hat on the Taoiseach's table and saying, "I am out of here if you do not do something", I do not know what more he can do. Surely members of RACO would be better in the ICTU than out on their own sitting in the corridor? I sat at pay talks and watched the association's members in the corridor.

Chairman: Commandant King can respond to the Senator's question later. He might finish responding to the one with which I was dealing.

Mr. Conor King: The last point I wanted to make-----

Chairman: We specifically did not ask the Chief of Staff that question because we did not want to put him in that position.

Mr. Conor King: If it was not a question for the Chief of Staff to answer, it is certainly not

one for me to answer.

Chairman: Has it been a subject of conversation?

Mr. Conor King: Certainly there is general interest in whether the Chief of Staff should be the Accounting Officer for the Defence Forces.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I asked him that question and I believe he said it is a matter for the Department and Government to decide what responsibilities he has.

Mr. Conor King: Again, I would say it is fairly obvious that the military authorities are the competent authorities to decide how operational budgets are spent. That is common sense.

Chairman: I am sure RACO engages in dialogue with other defence forces. Commandant King might let us know if he comes across a different structure with regard to the Accounting Officer position.

Mr. Conor King: We would also welcome future engagement with the committee if that were available to us. We dearly hope dearly that the next engagement with the committee will be on much more positive terms because we are all about positivity and adopting a can-do attitude. We do not want to be painting a negative picture of the Defence Forces.

Chairman: We speak for ourselves. We have been positive in this engagement.

Mr. Conor King: Absolutely.

Chairman: All colleagues present and others who were here earlier want to be positive. This committee under my stewardship has probably been more active on defence issues than other committees in the past. We needed to be active on them and that would be the view of the members of all parties and none on this committee. Commandant King might respond to Senator Craughwell's brief question and then I will go back to Deputy Jack Chambers.

Mr. Conor King: I firmly acknowledge this committee has been greatly interested in the welfare of the Defence Forces.

Chairman: I appreciate that.

Mr. Conor King: What I meant by what I said was that if we come before this committee again, we hope we will not be telling such a sad story.

Chairman: I appreciate that. I thought somebody following these proceedings might think that we were not active on these issues.

Mr. Conor King: Not at all.

Chairman: Commandant King might respond to Senator's Craughwell's question concerning ICTU.

Mr. Conor King: We have spoken about our industrial relations status and that strike action and withdrawal of labour are not compatible with military service. The European Court of Justice has ruled on that. It is not compatible with military service to take to the streets or withdraw labour and it is not something that sits comfortably with the members of RACO. My colleague, Mr. Derek Priestley, might like to comment further on this issue.

Mr. Derek Priestley: We can only reflect the firmly held views of our membership. It is not that long ago since we did a national tour of all the barracks and met our members during which this issue was raised as it is quite topical. Very few of our members would welcome the opportunity to join ICTU. There are good reasons for that. I do not particularly want to go into many of them, but at the end of the day we recognise our role in society and the job we do, and we believe it would present many difficulties for us if we were to join ICTU. Hence the reason we prefer the alternative of the notion of a pay review body unique to the Defence Forces. We cannot say, on the one hand, we have a 24-7 liability and all the restrictions in the military service that we and the Senator well know and then believe we should be treated like every other normal employee. We do not see ourselves as normal employees. All we can do is reflect the honestly held view of our membership who do not see themselves joining ICTU any day soon.

Mr. Conor King: Briefly, on that point, we are aware of overtures being made by the Department of Defence on behalf of another representative association to join the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. We are not aware of the military management's views on that but we would not expect them to be too complimentary. From RACO's perspective, we are not seeking to join the Irish Congress of Trade Unions because we believe it is not compatible with military service, but at the same time, if the State does not look after us and the welfare of its military personnel, there are not that many alternatives, so I can understand why other representative associations might be looking for other avenues.

The Senator mentioned the fond recollections he has of serving with two armed forces. I compliment him on his service with both. He has been a tireless and wonderful advocate for the Defence Forces. It is very much appreciated by soldiers, sailors and air crew of Óglaigh na hÉireann. I am delighted that the UK armed forces are still looking after him. He will always be welcome in any barracks in this State. That is for sure.

Chairman: I thank Commandant King for those comments. I will take final brief supplementary questions from Deputy Jack Chambers and other colleagues.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I agree with the suggestion about engagement. It would be good to have regular formal engagement at this committee as an accountability structure for the Department on many of the issues Commandant King outlined to enable a proper public airing of them. When we raise these issues on the floor of the Dáil, sometimes the Minister of State just reads a departmental memo. To provide some truth and context, perhaps it is important we have the witnesses here more regularly rather than hearing the nonsense from him.

Regarding the issue of morale, how do the association's members feel when other front-line public servants such as the gardaí got a €55 million bounce and nurses got a €35 million pay supplement while the members of RACO and PDFORRA are not even allowed attend oversight committees? How do the members of RACO feel about being treated as the worst-paid public servants and about being put outside the room and denigrated in that way when others are getting their pay issues addressed? Will Commandant King comment on the morale of the association's members in that respect and the choreography of it where some people can get some of their issues addressed because they can threaten with their right to strike and the fact that Defence Forces personnel cannot do that and this aspect has been used and abused on the pay issue?

With respect to the Air Corps, does Commandant King consider a single agency should be established? Some of the previous functions provided by the Air Corps have been removed, undermined and split up.

What is Commandant King's view of the fact that all the military advice and the recommendations included in the pay commission were stripped out and removed by the Department of Defence? How do the association's members feel about the fact that all the recommendations around pay were butchered by the Civil Service? Also, the parent joint submission was further butchered by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, which was confirmed by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe. That is the reason the alarming leaks are not so surprising when no case has been presented by the civil servants.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy for those questions. I have a final question. The briefing from the Department indicates that the strength of the Permanent Defence Force at the end of March was 8,847 whole-time equivalents. The witnesses have remarked to us that in reality the strength is nearly 1,000 lower than that, taking into consideration duties and the training of others. I ask them to go back over the figures to which they alluded in their earlier contribution.

Mr. Conor King: I will deal with Deputy Jack Chambers's supplementary questions first and then address those of the Chairman. Deputy Chambers asked how we feel about being excluded and about advantage being taken of our representative status. It was described by someone earlier this week as "gut wrenching". There is a sense of betrayal which is visceral and I fully agree with that sentiment. The fact is that we have sought to engage with the Lansdowne Road agreement oversight committee and have been blocked or ignored at every juncture. Our claim has been in since October or November 2018. It took 12 weeks to get an initial response to it. There was a further communication from RACO, through the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, and another few weeks passed with no answer. Finally, we got a response from the Department but we were not satisfied with that. We asked to go before the oversight committee only to be told, two months later, that the committee was not sitting for those few months. This was despite the fact that we knew the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation was in with the committee on a daily basis agitating on behalf of its members. Without being flippant, how does the Deputy think that feels?

On the question of how we feel about other unions and public service bodies agitating successfully for better pay for their members, it is very difficult to take. We rely on the goodwill of the State and the Government to look after us and in return we provide unremitting loyalty to the State. Some might call it blind loyalty but we just want it rewarded. Reference was made to the advice from the Department and military management in relation to the Public Service Pay Commission. I am painfully aware that the commission has yet to respond. It would be difficult for me to cast aspersions on the independence of that body. However, I can say that in future we would like an independent standing Defence Forces pay review body to look after the unique nature of military service and ensure that our loyalty is rewarded so that we do not have to rely on *ad hoc* public service pay commissions or public sector pay talks, where we have no say or no stake in the game.

Was there another question?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I asked about a single agency being established around the Air Corps.

Mr. Derek Priestley: Again, it is a matter for the Government to determine the way in which resources are divided up. When we talk to our Air Corps colleagues across the spectrum, they tell us that they want to do those roles. They feel that they are capable of doing them. They were very disappointed and upset when certain roles, particularly the search and rescue role, were taken away. We are all familiar with the fact that €500 million was the figure for the

contract for the search and rescue service. There is a sense in the Air Corps that it could have done a lot with that money rather than it being given to a private company. However, as I said, that is a matter for the Government. The professional officers who fly, the aero technicians, fire-fighters and air traffic controllers all felt that they were uniquely placed to provide that service. The decision has had a lasting impact. They would dearly love to do as much work as possible. We saw with the recent forest fires that people travelled long distances on their weekend off to respond. Members of the Air Corps, from the GOC down to the most junior apprentice, are dying to do those jobs so of course it has had an impact. Air Corps members would love to be able to do all of those jobs.

Mr. Conor King: The Chairman asked a question about the strength figures. He spoke about whole-time equivalents and what is reported to the Dáil. I will break it down into strength in station versus strength on paper. Unprecedented numbers are currently engaged in induction training and they are being counted by official sources when they talk about Defence Forces operational strength. Recruits and cadets are counted in that 8,800 odd figure to which the Deputy referred. We must take 500 or 600 off that total. We must take another 100 plus personnel off who are currently on leave of absence or special leave without pay or allowances. Operationally, at a domestic level, we can take another 700 personnel who are overseas off the total. If there are 700 personnel overseas, there are another 700 getting ready to go overseas as well who are not available to their units but we will not count that 700. This is why the establishment figure is 9,500, the reported strength is 8,800 but the actual strength in station and available is closer to 7,500.

Chairman: Mr. King is saying that the operational capacity of the Defence Forces is nearer to 7,000 at this time.

Mr. Conor King: Yes, the strength in station. Not only that, the figures are artificially inflated by the number of junior, inexperienced personnel who have been taken in at the lower levels, including cadets and recruits. I have very close experience of this, as a former operational commander of a mechanised company in the Defence Forces training centre. We had an establishment for 140 private soldiers but had a strength of more than 190. Where we fell down was that we had an establishment for 34 corporals but a strength of only seven. We have all of these private soldiers who need mentoring, training and supervision but we have no qualified, non-commissioned officers or officers to train them. That is why the figures are artificially inflated.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: May I ask one question? I believe there were 365 NCO vacancies last year or the year before. I cannot remember the exact number but it was more than 300. How did that arise?

Mr. Derek Priestley: I am not quite sure of the detail but I think there was a lot of discussion around the promotion system for NCOs and what was agreed with our sister association, PDFORRA. I cannot put my finger on anything, other than the fact that there was an ongoing discussion on that and the filling of vacancies was held up. I do not know the answer.

Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I thank the witnesses for their presentation and attendance today. They have painted a very bleak picture of the situation at all ranks in our Permanent Defence Forces. They referred to very low morale and raised questions regarding the well-being of officers, soldiers, sailors and aircrews. They also spoke about the loss of corporate knowledge, expertise and experience which is an enormous blow to our Permanent Defence Forces. The Government will have to take action to deal with this unprecedented re-

tention crisis to which the witnesses referred a number of times. For the sake of the country, we cannot have a completely demoralised Defence Forces. It is disappointing to learn about an obsession on the part of the Department with control and micromanagement. We will put those issues to the Department and Minister of State in our next engagement. We will follow that up. I heard a former Army officer comment on broadcast media in recent days that when a memo goes to Government, there is very little input from the military side. It is a Department of Defence memo rather than a major contribution being made by the military. That comment was made by a retired senior officer and, if true, it is disappointing. For the sake of our society, we need our Permanent Defence Forces to be properly and strongly resourced. Often at this committee, we refer to the great service provided by our Permanent Defence Forces. Given where I come from, I am very conscious of the subversion that existed on our island over a period of 30 years-----

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Hear, hear.

Chairman: -----from the late 1960s until the late 1990s. I recall very well the enormous contribution of members of the Permanent Defence Forces, An Garda Síochána and the Reserve Defence Force in dealing with the dangers that confronted our society. Of course, the great work our Defence Forces have been doing for decades overseas has enhanced our international reputation. It has also enhanced our international reputation as a country. We are very proud of the women and men who have served on overseas missions, and peacekeeping missions in dangerous situations, over the decades as well and we compliment them on their considerable contribution to Ireland's international reputation.

Commandant King commented earlier that there is a "dilution of security clearance measures" in recruiting people. That would have to raise alarm bells. RACO is suggesting, if I am reading Commandant King's comments correctly, that adequate security precautions are not being taken now in the recruitment of some individuals in the Permanent Defence Forces. I would sincerely hope that we are not going that road. Commandant King also raised the problems that arise from inadequate training timelines. Those all are issues that must be of concern to us, the Oireachtas and society. All we can do is say that we would be glad to support the issues RACO has raised with us today and bring them directly to the Minister and to the Department.

As my colleagues, Deputy Jack Chambers and Senator Leyden, stated, as a committee we would be glad to continue to have engagement with the association and its fellow representative associations as well. It is important that the association has the opportunity here to outline the issues of concern and that we have that engagement as well. It would inform us better in raising parliamentary questions and in other Dáil debates.

With the agreement of the committee, I will write to the Minister of State outlining a few issues Commandant King raised in regard to a defence pay review body. With regard to pay, I presume the commandant would also include review of service, pay and conditions, the need to have adequate retention measures, and the need to deal with the pensions issue that he outlined as well. We will raise those particular issues. We will have engagement again with the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, hopefully at an early date. The Minister of State has been before us at this committee on a number of occasions over the past few months but Commandant King can take it that we will write to the Department raising the issues that I outlined and that we will have further direct engagement at committee level with the Minister of State as well.

If there are other issues that RACO wishes to bring to our attention, Commandant King can communicate them to the Clerk to the Committee. All such correspondence is brought to all

individual members. It is a useful information process for us as well.

I thank Commandant King for his presentation and for his engagement, and thank my fellow committee members for their engagement on this important issue. I wish to put on the record again our appreciation of the work that the Permanent Defence Force and the Reserve Defence Force do on a daily basis on behalf of us all. It is work that we never hear about but that protects our society and our country.

The committee now stands adjourned until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 13 June 2019. As we discussed earlier, we have a number of other informal meetings between now and the next formal committee.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.03 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 13 June 2019.