

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL, AGUS COSAINTE

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE, AND DEFENCE

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*Déardaoin, 28 Samhain 2019*

*Thursday, 28 November 2019*

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The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Paul Kehoe,	Ivana Bacik,
Tony McLoughlin.	Billy Lawless,
	Gabrielle McFadden.

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies Jack Chambers, Denise Mitchell and Fiona O'Loughlin and Senators Gerard P. Craughwell and Kieran O'Donnell.

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

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** Apologies have been received from Deputies Maureen O’Sullivan and Seán Crowe.

*The joint committee went into private session at 10.34 a.m. and resumed in public session at 10.43 a.m.*

### **Scrutiny of EU Legislative Proposals**

**Chairman:** We will now deal with scrutiny of EU legislative proposals. On schedule B, we have COM (2019) 432, COM (2019) 438, COM (2019) 467, COM (2019) 477, COM (2019) 550 and COM (2019) 880. It is proposed that these proposals do not warrant further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed.

### **Recruitment and Retention in the Defence Forces: Discussion with Minister of State**

**Chairman:** I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach with responsibility for defence, Deputy Kehoe. I also welcome viewers on the Oireachtas website and on Oireachtas TV. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the ongoing concerns and issues with the recruitment and retention of personnel in the Defence Forces. In October, a delegation from this committee visited the Defence Forces training school in the Curragh. We thank the Department and the Defence Forces, in particular, Brigadier General Dignam, for organising and facilitating this worthwhile visit. We were afforded full and open access to the facilities and to personnel from all ranks. We received a tour of the accommodation in the Curragh where, as the Brigadier General stated, he showed us “the good, the bad and the ugly”. The general officer commanding, GOC, outlined his ambitious plans for the Curragh. The delegation got the opportunity to see accommodation that has been refurbished and to see some of the accommodation that requires major and urgent upgrading. I could go as far as saying that some of the accommodation for recruits was not fit for purpose, with a severe lack of facilities and poor to bad sanitary conditions. Due to a shortfall in expert personnel and the challenges the GOC faces retaining those with relevant skills and experience, it is difficult to see how and when these plans to improve the standard of accommodation will become a reality.

The delegation was also given the opportunity to have open and frank discussions with enlisted personnel and all other ranks right up to commissioned officers. We heard from all personnel that all areas are affected by the current shortfall in personnel. The engineering corps, paramedics and military police are especially affected by the lack of recruitment and the loss of key personnel. Some of the very positive suggestions we heard from those present to encourage greater recruitment and retention included: first, the engagement of external experts to report on recruitment and retention; second, to carry out a full Defence Forces audit of accommodation, focusing on the condition of the accommodation and; third, a call for a specific pay review board for the Defence Forces. However, the main concern and driver in this regard is the low level of pay. The delegation heard clearly, as we were told repeatedly, of the private sector offering far better remuneration and conditions of employment to the excellently trained and committed women and men of the Defence Forces. Personnel also commented that it is nearly

impossible for enlisted members of the Defence Forces to consider applying for a mortgage or to save a deposit for a home.

Pay and allowances must be addressed and a plan put in place to get it to a level where it demonstrates to Defence Forces personnel that the State appreciates their vital role. The sense of enormous pride within the group in being a member of the Irish Defence Forces was heartening. It was very clear that not one of the enlisted personnel at this meeting wanted to leave the Defence Forces. They wanted to further their careers but they are left with very little choice in many instances. I say all that, not alone on the basis of the visit of our delegation to the Curragh, but from all of the engagement we have had with the Army, the Naval Service and the Air Corps when the same problems and concerns were raised. We look forward to hearing the Minister of State's opening statement and his plans for dealing with these real issues. This committee will continue to pursue these matters and ensure that detailed and direct engagement is continued with the Defence Forces. I invite the Minister of State to make his opening statement, after which we will have questions and engagement from committee members.

**Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe):** I very much welcome the opportunity to set out some facts and give a summary of the actions the Government is taking with regard to recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces. The current difficulties facing the Defence Forces have attracted significant political interest. They have led to calls for increased pay for personnel in the Defence Forces and an accusation that the Government is in some way neglecting or treating the members of the Defence Forces unfairly. That is untrue and is a gross distortion of the facts. The requirement to reduce pay and numbers across the public service was a necessary response to the economic downturn and to ensure that the State was living within its means. I remind members that the situation that led to the economic downturn and the perilous state of the public finances was not of the Government's making. However, the Government was faced with hard decisions to get the country back on track. The reality is that pay cuts were applied across the public sector, including the Defence Forces, because there was no choice but to do so. The cuts are now being reversed through pay agreements, to which the Defence Forces representative associations are parties. Other sectoral savings were also achieved, including in the defence sector, and the Defence Forces were not singled out for such savings.

The Government is aware of the difficulties the Defence Forces are experiencing in respect of the recruitment and retention of personnel, in particular certain specialists. As members will be aware, this has impacted certain operational outputs in the Naval Service and Air Corps. There is a range of factors contributing to this, which are not solely related to pay. As committee members are aware, the mechanisms to consider pay in the public service are currently framed by the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020. As part of this agreement, all parties agreed that the independent Public Service Pay Commission would examine recruitment and retention issues, where these occurred. Following the first report of the pay commission and, in accordance with the provisions of the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020, the Government tasked the commission with prioritising a comprehensive examination of recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces. The Department of Defence and the Defence Forces undertook significant work in preparing statistical information for consideration by the Public Service Pay Commission. The report of the independent Public Service Pay Commission was published and accepted by Government in July this year. It contains a broad range of recommendations aimed at improving recruitment and retention in the Permanent Defence Force. In recognition of the many factors contributing to recruitment and retention issues, its recommendations include financial and non-financial aspects. In accepting the report of the

Public Service Pay Commission, the Government also approved a plan “Strengthening Our Defence Forces - Phase 1” to implement the recommendations in the report. The plan provides for a number of specific projects which are being progressed by civil and military personnel.

I am pleased to say that the Permanent Defence Force representative associations accepted the immediate recommendations which provide for increases in certain Defence Forces allowances. This includes: a 10% increase in military service allowance; the restoration in the rates of certain duties allowance that were reduced under the Haddington Road Agreement; and premium rates of certain allowances for duties performed at weekends are also being reinstated. The payments and any back money due have been made. The increases in military service allowance and the restoration of the rates of the other allowances as recommended by the Public Service Pay Commission are in addition to measures relating to core pay which are in the current public service stability agreement.

In recognition of a specific issue regarding the retention of Air Corps pilots, the Public Service Pay Commission recommended the restoration of the service commitment scheme for Air Corps pilots which was discontinued in 2010. Broadly speaking, the scheme foresees the following in return for a service commitment, which can vary between five and eight years: an annual payment of just over €22,000 to flying officers holding the ranks of captain, commandant or lieutenant colonel; the annual payment will attract the 5% restoration of cuts to allowances that applied under the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act, FEMPI, scheduled for 1 October 2020. Following this, the annual payment and terminal bonus will be subject to the prevailing public service pay policy over the remaining period of the commitment. In addition, depending on the details of the commitment to service to be given by each eligible flying officer, these pilots may also receive a terminal bonus, once off, of between approximately €14,800 and €37,000. A flying officer of captain, commandant or lieutenant colonel rank who gives a full eight-year commitment from the start could earn just over €200,000 under the scheme.

It is also important to note that the plan provides for further measures in the pay and non-pay areas. A review of pay structures in the Permanent Defence Force in the context of the next pay agreement is provided for. The plan also provides for the identification of incentivisation measures for certain specialists, which will be also be considered in the context of the next pay agreement. A review of technical pay arrangements is ongoing and an initial report is under consideration. A range of other non-pay measures are also being progressed.

Aside from the immediate recommendations arising from the Public Service Pay Commission, there were a number of outstanding adjudication findings which could not be implemented, having regard to the provisions of the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Acts 2009 to 2015. This applies across the public service and is not just specific to the Defence Forces.

Following discussions I had with my colleague, the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, on this matter, we agreed to prioritise the outstanding adjudications in respect of the Defence Forces. The effect of these measures is: an increase of around €50 per week in the Army Ranger Wing allowance; cooks with the relevant qualifications will go from Tech Pay 2 to Tech Pay 3, which is an increase from €26.90 to €40.42 per week; non-commissioned officers appointed as account holders to administer, manage certain barrack services accounts and who are not currently not in receipt of the account holder allowance will each receive the allowance of €65.80 per week; and recruits and apprentices will no longer be charged for rations and accommodation, current charge €43.63 per week. The aboli-

tion of this charge for this cohort of personnel will be of significant benefit to these personnel who are the lowest paid in the Defence Forces.

The Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association, PDFORRA, accepted this offer and the revised rates are currently being implemented. These awards are paid with effect from 1 October 2018.

I was also pleased that the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform agreed to the introduction of a special tax credit for seagoing members of the Naval Service in the Finance Bill. The tax credit is based on the design of the existing fishers' tax credit, which was introduced in 2017, for the purpose of incentivising the sea-fishing industry. It is the result of constructive engagement within the Government, by my officials and Defence Forces management, including those within the Naval Service. This is something that both military management and PDFORRA have sought. This is another positive step that builds on this Government's commitment to addressing the challenges in the Defence Forces.

Although fixed period promotion for special services officers in the Defence Forces was not specifically recommended by the Public Service Pay Commission, its consideration was included in the Government's implementation plan. The Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, was particularly concerned that the withdrawal of such promotions was adversely affecting retention of special service officers. I directed that the restoration of this initiative be prioritised. Department officials are engaging with RACO on this subject with a view to arranging for a smooth implementation of the scheme.

There is perhaps an unhealthy focus on headline turnover rates. With a turnover rate of 8.1 % in 2018, this is not significantly at variance with other military forces internationally. However, it is the underlying figures that are important, including the extent to which personnel can be replaced, particularly where there are long lead times for training. The goal is to have sustainable and healthy turnover, which is necessary to allow personnel to develop and progress through the ranks.

As with many other areas of the public service, difficulties in the recruitment and retention of personnel have arisen in a buoyant economy, with many personnel, including pilots, air traffic control staff and Naval Service technicians, having scarce and highly marketable skills. This is also being experienced by many military forces internationally.

There are a variety of reasons people choose to leave their employment. While pay is obviously an issue, what should be noted is that some 50% of Defence Forces personnel who leave have accrued a pension entitlement. This can add to the attractiveness of another employment, where the Defence Forces pension is paid in addition to the wages the individual receives from the non-public service employer.

The Permanent Defence Force continues to offer excellent career opportunities for serving personnel and for new entrants. There are significant opportunities for career progression and development within the Defence Forces. There were over 800 promotions in the Permanent Defence Force in 2018. Earlier this year, 24 enlisted personnel completed a potential officers course and were commissioned as officers. Under my direction, further potential officers courses will be undertaken in 2021 and 2024.

While I acknowledge that there are retention issues, there are many in the Defence Forces who choose to stay and indeed want to continue to serve and further their career. This year

I approved measures to be put in place which would allow privates and corporals who were enlisted post 1994, to remain in service to the end of 2022, or age 50 years, whichever comes first, subject to meeting certain specified criteria including fitness and medical standards. This is to provide the space for the completion of a comprehensive examination of age profiles and mandatory retirement in the Defence Forces is completed. I also announced at the PDFORRA annual delegate conference last month that I had directed my officials to enter into discussions with PDFORRA with a view to allowing sergeants continue in service to the same date, subject to their meeting agreed criteria in the interim period.

I have mentioned previously that the Government intends to implement the provisions of the Organisation of the Working Time Act 1997, for an Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. This matter as it pertains to the Defence Forces is being progressed with the Permanent Defence Force representative associations through the conciliation and arbitration scheme. My Department remains in close contact with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection which is the lead Department for the legislation relating to working time.

In order to balance personnel turnover there is significant ongoing recruitment at both enlisted and officer level and there have been 576 inductions into the Defence Forces so far this year. To enhance recruitment efforts further, I instructed that a working group be established to examine recruitment processes in the Defence Forces. This group is chaired by an external human resources expert who will bring many years of experience to bear and advise on any potential modifications to current processes that could improve and further streamline current recruitment methods. The working group has incorporated the appropriate recommendations of the Public Service Pay Commission report into its terms of reference. It is progressing its work as a project under the high-level implementation plan, Strengthening our Defence Forces.

The issue of specialist vacancies throughout the Permanent Defence Force is being addressed with training of personnel internally as well as a range of recruitment methods, including direct entry competitions for specialist positions. The scope to expand direct entry further is being considered. A new initiative to allow former Permanent Defence Force officers with appropriate skill sets to re-enter the Defence Forces has seen in recent weeks two former pilots being recommissioned in the Air Corps.

The Government is committed to reaching a strength level of 9,500 personnel. It recognises that achieving this strength is a key challenge for the Chief of Staff and the Defence Forces. I am confident all the measures contained in the Government's high-level plan, coupled with pay benefits being delivered by the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020, will address recruitment and retention challenges being experienced by the Permanent Defence Force. This combination of short, medium and longer-term initiatives is intended to address fully recruitment and retention difficulties in the Permanent Defence Force. The full impact of these measures will take time to achieve. It must also be recognised there are also a range of external variables that impact on recruitment and retention and that can change. The capacity of the Defence Forces to undertake the tasks assigned by the Government will continue to be monitored carefully having regard to the implementation of the recommendations of the pay commission and other actions that are under way.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister of State for his opening statement. I call Senator McFadden.

**Senator Gabrielle McFadden:** I have never been first before. I thank the Minister of State and his officials for attending the committee. He is always willing to attend the committee or

the Seanad when requested to do so. I acknowledge and appreciate that.

I know I am a thorn in his side about this issue. Sometimes, I feel I am repeating myself. We all know why pay had to be reduced in the Defence Forces and in other sectors. We must never forget why it happened and who was responsible for it. We must hope that we have put in place procedures that will ensure it never happens again.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I will not take the Senator's political charge.

**Chairman:** Please proceed, Senator McFadden.

**Senator Gabrielle McFadden:** I would appreciate it if I could speak without interruption. I would never interrupt Deputy Chambers. I know the Minister of State appreciates the Defence Forces had to make hard decisions in the past. We are now, however, reversing financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI. I have said before that the Public Service Pay Commission is not suitable for the Defence Forces, however. The nature of the job that they do, combined with the prohibition on strikes and union membership, sets the members of the Defence Forces apart, as does their passion and commitment to the State. Any decisions made about their terms and conditions should not be made in the same light as other sectors. That is why I have asked the Minister of State to consider an independent review board for the Defence Forces.

The Minister of State referred to recruitment and the working group. It might be a good idea to examine recruitment. However, a higher priority is retention. We invest much money in training recruits but then we lose them because they have to make a choice that best suits them. The Defence Forces provide a good profession. All its members are committed and passionate about what they do. They choose that profession because of their commitment and passion about the country. Its members will say that they love the job and want to stay in it. We need to give them a reason to stay.

The committee's visit to the Curragh Camp has been referred to already where we met the General Officer Commanding, GOC, Brigadier General Dignam. He was gracious and showed us the good, the bad and the ugly. It was of benefit to many of us who had never seen it before. Many of us already knew the conditions under which soldiers are living and their commitment. These conditions are not suitable for anybody. Between six and ten new recruits can share a room with no provisions, rotten floors, mould on the walls, no proper showers along with bathrooms that could not be used. I have a son in second year in college. If I had to leave my child in those conditions, my heart would be broken. That is not good enough for any recruit who commits himself to the State. I urge the Minister of State and his officials to look at the capital expenditure for the Defence Forces. The GOC explained that they cannot get people to maintain the facilities because they cannot pay them properly like they pay in the private sector. That needs to be examined. There are other excellent facilities in the Curragh Camp that the GOC pointed out.

Will the Minister of State look at an independent review board for the Defence Forces? We should not be making politics out of the situation. We all want the best for the Defence Forces, the Minister of State included. I thank him for his time.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I thank Senator McFadden. It is my responsibility to come before the committee or the Seanad. I have never failed to attend if I have been asked to explain a matter.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Chairman, if somebody is going to be making utterances while I am speaking-----

**Chairman:** I will conduct the meeting. You can proceed, Minister of State.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I think it is totally unfair.

**Chairman:** There is no point in giving us a lecture that you come into the committee or go to the Seanad when asked. It is your parliamentary obligation. Please proceed.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** It is unfair

**Chairman:** Please proceed.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** It is unfair that people are making utterances when I am speaking.

**Chairman:** I did not hear anyone making utterances. Please proceed. I was listening to you.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Pay was reduced in 2011. When I came into government, all public sector pay was reduced because of the country's financial situation at the time. There were significant cutbacks in all Departments. It was because of the economic situation in which we found ourselves. It took quite a number of years to rebuild the economy and to give the lower paid of the public service something back into their pockets, as well as built infrastructure. I recognise that there were severe cutbacks. It was not the space in which I wanted to be, but there was an economic situation with which we had to deal.

One reason we can give Defence Forces members to stay is the restoration of pay and allowances as recommended by the Public Service Pay Commission and accepted by the Government, PDFORRA and RACO, the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers. Weekend duty and 24-hour duty allowances have been restored. There will be further restoration under FEMPI before the public service stability agreement concludes.

The Senator referred to an independent review body. Public service pay determination is conducted through central negotiations. The Defence Forces representative associations were afforded equal status to other public service unions and associations during these negotiations. Defence Forces personnel have received the benefits of collective agreements in the past and it is intended that future remuneration of Defence Forces personnel will continue to be dealt with within this process. There are no plans to create a separate pay determination process for the Defence Forces as to do so would lead to the dismantling of collective negotiation and each sector having a right to individual pay determination.

RACO held an event at which military personnel from the United Kingdom spoke about a separate pay determination. The UK, which is consistently used as a comparator, has a different method of determining rates of public sector pay, with independent pay review bodies for all sectors, be they health, education and police and military services. We do not have such a system.

The UK armed forces do not have representative associations such as PDFORRA and RACO to represent them or to negotiate on their behalf, unlike here where PDFORRA and RACO meet the Minister numerous times annually and on an agreed basis with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. They interact with public servants in the Department of Defence

and also with military management. The UK armed forces also do not have a conciliation and arbitration scheme. There are benefits to a separate pay determination but there are negatives as well.

Acceptance by PDFORRA and RACO of the independent pay commission recommendations is a positive step. I have spoken to members of both associations, and non-members, who have told me they have received immediate benefits arising from implementation of the pay commission recommendations.

I acknowledge that we face many challenges, but we are trying to meet them, including through the independent pay commission. Next year, there will be a further round of public sector pay talks. Within the high-level implementation plan there is scope to prepare for that process. Military management, officials from my Department and the representative associations can feed into that process. It is important that we have the scope to do that. The previous round of public sector pay talks was focused on giving back to personnel what had been taken from them. The next round will be different. I hope that there will be further scope for pay increases.

On the Curragh Camp, it would be remiss of me not to outline some of the projects that are under way there. I welcome that the committee, led by the Chairman, had an opportunity to visit the barracks. It is only right and proper that it would have the opportunity to visit the barracks or overseas missions. I have always encouraged members of the committee to see at first hand the barracks from which our Defence Forces are operating. I welcome that the committee undertook a detailed tour of the accommodation in the Curragh, which along with other areas has received significant investment and is now of good standard, and that which remains in need of significant investment.

The portfolio of the Defence Forces' properties includes many that are old and require significant levels of investment. This is evident as one drives through the Curragh Camp. It would take millions of euros to complete all of the work needed there. A significant amount of work has been done. The same is true of all of barracks across the country. We are catching up. There was no investment in the barracks from 2008 to 2012 owing to the lack of money. As the country returned to a better fiscal space there has been significant investment over recent years in the Curragh Camp, but as I said, more is needed. Between 2016 and 2018, we spent €17 million on capital projects, including blocks B and D in Pearse barracks. This year, we are investing €3.5 million on maintenance and improvements in the Curragh Camp, a €2 million project in Plunkett Block 7, an upgrade and extension of the mission preparations centre of the cadet school headquarters at a cost of €2 million, which will commence in 2020, and a €2.4 million upgrade in quarter 2 of 2020 of electrical target range.

The Ranger wing is located in old stable blocks. Some members have stated that it has no running water and no appropriate ablution facilities, but my understanding is that the committee did not visit the Ranger wing of the Curragh Camp. The General Officer Commanding, GOC, in the Curragh is working with the support of the Department's property management plan to continue efforts to improve the built infrastructure in the camp. I expect to sign-off on a multi-annual plan for the Defence Forces in the coming weeks.

If we poured all of our resources into the Curragh Camp, Defence Forces personnel, including Naval Service personnel, in Kilkenny, Cork, Dundalk, Galway, Athlone and Dublin would be disappointed. The Department is working with military management to address all of the problems and to construct new infrastructure and proper accommodation for members of the Defence Forces.

**Chairman:** I must advise the Minister of State that we must vacate this room by noon and there are other members who would like participate. The Minister of State will have another opportunity later to respond to any questions that he has not answered in this round. I ask Deputy Chambers to be brief in order that all other members will have an opportunity to put questions to the Minister of State.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I read the Minister of State's opening statement, which, surprisingly, makes no reference to docked naval vessels, tied up aircraft, the Taoiseach's speculation around a commission on defence, or the general sense of collapse and lack of confidence in his tenure of the Department of Defence, where there is an ongoing cycle of crises. It appears as though the Department is trying to wind down core operations. When will the aeromedical service be reinstated and when will docked vessels be returned to sea? I am asking very specific questions because I am conscious of time.

A year ago, it was recommended that an independent chair be appointed to be conciliation and arbitration scheme. Has a candidate been selected? If so, what is his or her name and when will the appointment be made?

The Minister of State referred to an unhealthy focus on turnover at 8.1%, which is above norm. Does that 8.1% represent turnover for last year or this year and has turnover improved or worsened between last year and this year? The Minister of State has sought to deflect and undermine the focus on turnover by people in the media and the political system. We have a responsibility to focus on turnover and the Minister of State's failure both to halt the exodus of personnel from the Defence Forces and to encourage new recruits to remain. On what we area direct our focus is none of his business. I am sure the Minister of State will respond that the 8.1% figure provided today is in respect of turnover for last year because turnover is above 10% this year. It is worsening under this Minister of State's tenure and it is why we are seeing these collapsing structures. Will the Minister of State indicate how many people have agreed to join the pilot retention scheme? Will that address the ongoing retention crisis?

When will we see the aeromedical service back at full operational capacity? What aircraft has specifically replaced the aeromedical service? Has the Department received any communication from Health Service Executive hospitals about the appropriateness of that aircraft?

Will there be a commission on the future of defence? Will the Minister of State provide a specific number for the pilots who have returned? What is the target retention rate and when is it envisaged that this will be achieved? The Department of the Taoiseach provided the high-level implementation plan and it appears the Minister of State's Department has taken over that plan. What is the governance around the implementation of the plan and have all the timelines been matched? Has the Department received any communication about a risk that a third or fourth ship will be tied up? Have any delays been communicated to the Minister of State on the use of the Garda helicopter because it could not be crewed on time?

In his statement, the Minister of State indicates that a newly qualified three-star private gets over €28,000 in gross pay and he has tried to compare this to other levels in the public service. Does the Minister of State agree it is an indisputable fact that pay within the Defence Forces is the worst across the public services? The Minister of State selectively commented on a salary of €28,255 while ignoring the starting rates for an apprentice and a recruit, which at €14,726 and €20,746, respectively, are well below the figure mentioned by him. He has sought to misrepresent entry pay rates to try to deflect from the ongoing recruitment difficulties that the Defence Forces are having. Why did he overstate the figure?

I am surprised that the Minister of State seems to have dismissed the data from the Public Service Pay Commission report. He states people seem to be leaving because they have accrued a pension entitlement but we must be absolutely clear that 84.5% of those people leaving are citing pay issues, according to the report, with 73.6% citing collapsing staffing levels. They also leave citing pressure around commuting time, poor training and promotion opportunities and a high level of demands and burnout. The Minister of State has decided to pick the pension as a means to deflect from his failure to address core issues around defence policy. It demonstrates that he has his head in the sand that the Minister of State is picking out pensions as a reason for the exodus. He really does not have this.

In what year will the figure of 9,500 personnel be achieved? Will we be closer to it some time next year than we are this year? Will he provide an update on the projected turnover rates within the Defence Forces?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I thank the Deputy. I would have liked to have included much more in my opening statement but it would have gone on for at least 20 minutes or even a half hour if I included everything. The Deputy mentioned the air ambulance. I made everybody aware that there is a challenge in the Air Corps with pilot retention. I announced a number of initiatives in and around this area, including the pilot retention scheme suggested by the independent pay commission. It is one of the projects that has been implemented. The closing date for that is tomorrow and we will have to wait to see how many people have applied. I will not say how many have or have not before that. The closing date is tomorrow and I will be able to answer the question after the closing date. There have been negotiations and some further questions have been put by people interested in joining the pilot retention scheme. A number of those queries were answered by my Department earlier this week and my officials have been in discussions with the general officer commanding, GOC, on the matter.

It came to my attention in late September or October that there would be a challenge with the air ambulance service. It also came to my attention last year that there would be a challenge but we were able to keep the service going. A proposal came from military management and the GOC Air Corps that if we were able to take this specific air ambulance helicopter out of service for four days in November, December, January and February, it would be able to restore the ongoing service after that. When that came to my attention, one of my first actions was to contact the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris. I spoke to the Minister at length about this and my officials in the Department of Defence were in contact with officials in the Department of Health. We had a specific meeting about this and we decided that we would contact people in the community helicopter service sector, who stated they would be able to provide a service for the four days in November, December, January and February.

We selected the four-day period in November, December, January and February because of daylight hours and it is the time of least numbers of call-outs. This may result from fog and bad weather, for example. We selected this time instead of June, July, August and September, for example, as we considered when this would have the least impact. It was decided that the four winter months would see the least impact in that regard. I reassure the Deputy and this committee, as well as anybody listening today, that the service will be up and running on 1 March 2020. I am delighted that we have the backup of the Coast Guard as well and this was always in the agreement originally signed by the Government.

The air ambulance had been sought for years and in the very lean period in 2011 we were able to introduce the service and it was put on a permanent basis in 2015. I disagree with the Deputy on this issue, as this was sought before-----

**Chairman:** There are many questions to be answered in respect of the current position. We are not interested in history because of time constraints.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The Minister of State seems to be talking down the clock.

**Chairman:** We do not need historical background. We need the current position and what will happen in future.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** He is trying to talk down the clock and obfuscate matters.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I was asked about the air ambulance service.

**Chairman:** You were asked about the current service. We know when it was established. Please proceed with answering the questions.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** This will come back into full service on 1 March 2020. The Deputy spoke about the commission on the future of defence and we have the White Paper on defence. I will bring that to the Government next week. The Deputy will have heard what the Taoiseach said in the Dáil when Deputy Burton asked about his plans about that.

We have two pilots who returned under the re-entry programme and who were former pilots in the Air Corps. I was delighted to be able to recommission them a number of weeks ago. I understand a number of inquiries have been received from other people who would like to return to service. On the high-level implementation plan which I spoke about on strengthening our Defence Forces, it includes the Department of the Taoiseach, my Department, military management and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. A civil-military team has been set up under my direction in the Department of Defence. It is going through all the projects at present. A huge body of work is ongoing in this regard and it will continue.

The Deputy referred to the Garda helicopter. Nobody, including the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, has come to me about delays in respect of the Garda helicopter being taken on.

The Deputy spoke about the three-star privates and apprentices. When a person comes into recruit class, he or she is not fully qualified until he or she does the three months' training. Then the person starts on €28,000. There might be a weekend duties allowance and other allowances due if the person gets overseas within a short number of years. An accountant does not start on a full salary the minute he or she starts to work. One must do one's training. That is part of it, just as it is for apprentices. I never distorted the figures. I have always stated that a fully trained, three-star private starts on €28,000 after three months. I was delighted to announce last July that a person in training will receive an extra €40 because now the person does not have to pay the rations that had to be paid previously, so a three-star private in training is getting an increase following the announcement.

As to when I expect to get back to the complement of 9,500, it is difficult. First, we are fully funded for 9,500 personnel after negotiations between my Department's officials and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. I will not put a date on when-----

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The Minister of State cannot.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** -----we will come back to 9,500 personnel, but I can give a commitment that everything will be done by military management, the Department's management and my office to ensure we come back to that number. We are competing with a buoyant economy.

One can see from the last 20 or 30 years that when the Defence Forces are competing with a buoyant economy, their numbers fall. In 2011, the Defence Forces was the only organisation that had ongoing recruitment, at a time when Members of the Opposition said there should not be ongoing recruitment. However, there was ongoing recruitment during those lean, difficult years.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Chairman, the Minister of State is trying to deflect from the questions again.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** The Deputy referred to the Naval Service. The Government acknowledges the recruitment and retention issues currently impacting on Naval Service operations. A civil-military group was established to examine these challenges. It has identified a number of specific HR options to address them. The group will continue to progress these and keep me and the Department-----

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Chairman, he is not answering the questions. I asked-----

**Senator Gabrielle McFadden:** Chairman, this is political now.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I asked if the Minister of State had received a communication that a third or fourth ship could be tied up. He is not answering my questions.

**Chairman:** Just a second, Senator McFadden and Deputy Jack Chambers.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** If there is a total disregard for the committee system, what are we doing?

**Chairman:** Deputy Kehoe, please continue on the specific questions that were asked. We want specific answers to the questions.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Chairman, it was very regrettable that two ships, the *LÉ Eithne* and the *LÉ Orla*, were brought in for routine maintenance earlier this year and are now on operational pause. The civil-military group that was set up will continue to brief me on these-----

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** This is a disregard for the democratic process.

**Chairman:** I am not responsible for the Minister of State's response.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The Minister of State is not answering the questions. Has he received communication that a third or fourth ship might be tied up?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I have not been advised about a third or fourth ship being tied up.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Okay, that is an answer. Can he tell us-----

**Chairman:** I ask the Minister of State to respond to the specific questions that were put to him. Deputy Jack Chambers asked specific questions, not for speeches. I ask the Minister of State to respond specifically to the questions asked.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Chairman, you should go back over my answers. He asked me specific questions about how many people who requested-----

**Chairman:** One second, Minister.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** He asked me how many people had applied for the pilot retention

scheme. I said two have applied.

**Chairman:** I am not going back and wasting more time. He asked you specifically about the ships and you answered the question. If you would answer in the same format as to whether you had or had not been informed, we would appreciate it. We want to make progress and there are other members who wish to contribute.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Chairman, there are some “Yes” and “No” answers but I am going to give background-----

**Chairman:** You are supplementing the reasons.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** -----as to the reasons.

**Chairman:** We are under time constraints and please be mindful that other members wish to contribute.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I am under no-----

**Chairman:** Minister, do not speak when I am speaking. Other members of the committee wish to contribute and you should try to co-operate and ensure that everybody has an opportunity to pose their questions and that you have an opportunity to answer them. Please proceed.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** He asked me eight questions. I will not give a “Yes” or “No” answer. There are specific reasons as to why I am giving an answer. He asked me about the appointment of the chair of the conciliation and arbitration scheme. I do not have the name of the independent chairman as there are still some outstanding issues with the representative associations, but I am happy that I will have those issues resolved in a short while. Both associations want this independent chairman appointed. I carried out a review of the conciliation and arbitration scheme, which I was asked about in 2016. It was the first thing I did. I am content that we will have one. I can absolutely assure the Deputy that it is not my office or the Department holding up the appointment of an independent chairman.

**Chairman:** I will take the questions of Senator Craughwell and Deputy O’Loughlin together.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** My first question is about the Lariam drug. The Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, removed the licence for Lariam in 2016, yet it is still in use in the Defence Forces. Why is that? How many legal cases have been lodged against the Department of Defence and the State with respect to the side effects soldiers were experiencing from the use of Lariam? Will the Minister of State make each of the service personnel concerned fight the case through the courts or does he intend to set up an informal redress scheme to deal with these issues? Is the State going to look after service personnel who are suffering the side effects of Lariam within the Defence Forces family? Will the Minister of State make specialist care available to members of the Defence Forces who have lodged claims with regard to Lariam? Due to the nature of Lariam, will the Minister of State invite the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, to examine the debacle of Lariam? Those are my questions on Lariam.

Will the Minister of State accept that the recruitment policies are failing? I see no embarrassment from him or the Department with respect to the failure in recruitment. It is an outrage that 140 recruits left the Defence Forces during training and did not complete their training.

There is a net overall loss of approximately 200, given the number who left and the number who joined. Yesterday, the Minister of State issued a press release to *The Irish Times* which compared apples and oranges. It refers to the salary of €24,000 or €25,000 that is paid to a clerical officer in a local authority and indicated that a three star private receives a salary of €28,255. How many members of the public service are told on their way out the gate after spending a day on duty that they are needed for several days to tackle a forest fire in Donegal? Soldiers are not ordinary public servants. They are available to the State 365 days of the year and 24 hours a day. The Minister of State cannot compare apples and oranges and it is disingenuous to do so.

With respect to the Naval Service, the Minister of State talked about the tax break that was given to sailors. Is it not true that fishermen have had the tax break for many years? Is it not true that sailors receive a seagoing allowance that is four times less than that paid to staff in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine? Why is there a differential in seagoing allowances when public servants on land can all receive the same travel and subsistence allowances?

With respect to the Air Corps, the Minister of State has told us that two pilots returned and have been recommissioned. Is it true that the two pilots who have been recommissioned both hold the rank of lieutenant colonel? Will they be flying? Will the allowances be paid to commandants and lieutenants colonel who are flying, particularly in the area of the air ambulance service?

The Minister of State gave a guarantee in the Seanad and again today that the air ambulance service will be up and running on 1 March 2020. I understand that the air ambulance service needs ten crews and we have two crews. If one or two pilots leave before 1 March, we will not be able to operate an emergency air ambulance service from Athlone. Will the Minister of State explain precisely how he can guarantee that there will be an air ambulance service?

The Minister of State referred to an increased allowance of up to €200,000 that will be available to pilots who sign up for eight years. That was a lovely piece to put into *The Irish Times* article but he did not state that there were three options, namely, a three-year, five-year and eight-year option. He has constantly harped on about the private sector taking away our pilots. Michael O'Leary, the head of Ryanair, had to create special retention measures to keep his pilots. It was utterly disingenuous to refer only to the eight-year option. The Minister of State also referred to a stream of pilots who want to return. Nobody knows who they are. Perhaps he will tell us precisely the number of people who have made inquiries about returning to the Air Corps.

On the allowances that are paid to retain pilots, what about areas such as engineering, ordnance, bomb disposal and cybersecurity where we have two empty seats in the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. I ask the Minister of State to admit today that he has single-handedly-----

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Chairman, that is-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** The Minister of State did not like it when people on this side spoke during his contribution. I ask for the same respect that he demands. The Minister of State with responsibility for Defence, rather than the Minister for Defence, the Taoiseach, appears before this committee. The buck should stop with the Taoiseach but it stops with the Minister of State because he has responsibility for defence. His policies have been a total failure. He has failed the Defence Forces and its serving members. He has lost the respect of all ranks.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to raise a few ques-

tions and make a few comments.

The Minister of State referred to a “gross distortion of the facts” in the public domain. He is absolutely wrong about that. Any statements made by my party are based on factual figures. We do not need a history lesson about the recession. The Fine Gael Party has been in government for nine years. It is up to the Minister of State and his colleagues to take charge and introduce affirmative action for the members of the Defence Forces. I will never apologise for standing up for the men and women who serve our country and whose interests I represent.

I thank the Chairman for leading the delegation who visited the Curragh and thank Brigadier General David Dignam for his welcome. The engagement that we had on all sides was very welcome. We had a very open and frank discussion with serving members of all ranks. What was very clear was the sense of pride and commitment in the men and women who are members of the Defence Forces but also complete frustration, anger and despair at the situation in which they find themselves. Many will never be able to apply for a mortgage. I was shocked by the standard of living they and their families have but I do not have time to go into the details.

In terms of the infrastructure in the Curragh, we visited the former stables. It was appalling to see the conditions that some of our soldiers experience, both those who live there permanently and those who visit for training purposes. I acknowledge the good work that has been done to refurbish some of the accommodation and it was evident that good use was made of the moneys made available for refurbishment. I find it appalling that servants of the State must live in such conditions or, in the case of those who travel daily to the Curragh, endure them. I completely understand the frustration concerning the €23 million that was handed back last year. The money could have been invested in the Curragh, which is the heart of the Defence Forces, and in other places, as has been mentioned.

Yesterday, in a timely article published in *The Irish Times*, the Department of Defence stated that pay rates for serving personnel “were competitive when compared to other areas within the public service and private sector.” If that were the case, why have 706 personnel already left so far this year?

It is appalling that the outstanding claims lodged some time ago by the Army Ranger Wing have not been agreed to at this point.

The Minister of State is the junior Minister so perhaps he is not to blame. Does he believe there should be a full Cabinet position for a Minister for Defence? My party believes such a post should be created because there might be more commitment and recognition given to our Defence Forces.

I note that Senator Colm Burke has committed to a pay review. That is the correct approach. Are some in the Fine Gael Party taking contradictory positions?

Does the Minister of State plan to extend the service commitment scheme to other categories of specialist personnel experiencing retention challenges such as air traffic control, marine, electrical engineering and cyberdefence? When will these critical measures be delivered? As we heard on our visit to the Curragh, Defence Forces personnel are double and triple jobbing. They do not have any more to give.

A year ago, a commitment was given that the Curragh secondary school would get a new building and the school would consider supporting pupils from Newbridge and Kildare. We met the Minister of State on this matter some time ago but nothing has happened. I ask him for

an update on the position.

The Minister of State should make no mistake, the Defence Forces are in crisis and Fine Gael, without a shadow of a doubt, has let down members of the Defence Forces and their families.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I welcome the Minister of State and I hope that he will be able to do something that he has failed to do so far. I would like him to assure me, members of the public and, most important, the men and women of the Defence Forces that he has an understanding of what is happening, is listening and accepts that the situation in the Defence Forces has reached crisis stage.

I have a list of questions and comments that have been collated by my colleague, Deputy Ó Snodaigh. All we seek are “Yes” or “No” answers. We do not need to hear long stories. Is the Minister of State aware that members of the explosive ordnance disposal unit must often work a 70-hour shift? Is it true that the food budget of the Defence Forces equates to €4.35 per person per day while the budget for a prisoner is €6.25? Is the Minister of State aware that it is reported that soldiers regularly sleep in their cars because there is no room in the barracks, they cannot afford to commute and they need to save their money? Is the Minister of State aware that last month a member of the Naval Service worked ten 24-hour shift duties in a single month? This was reported to my colleague, Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh. The person could not say no. This was on top of the person’s daily duties. For the extra hours worked all this individual came out with after tax was €275. Does the Minister of State think this is fair? Does he accept the State is taking advantage of this individual and others, including military personnel who put in six, seven or eight 24-hour shifts a month in Government Buildings on top of their daily barracks duties? Does the Minister of State accept he would not get away with this type of worker abuse in any other sector because trade unions and the workers themselves would not allow it?

I know we are pushed for time but I have one more question for the Minister of State. Does he take any responsibility for the failure to show that, given the nature of the job, a special case should always be made to pay soldiers properly for their service? They do not get overtime but they work it. They take orders and do extended double, triple or quadruple shifts. They are on call morning, noon and night and their work is not comparable with that of any other pay sector. They have no union rights. They are not covered by the working time directive. They cannot strike. Their loyalty is being taken for granted. Does the Minister of State accept this is the case?

**Deputy Tony McLoughlin:** I welcome the Minister of State and his officials, despite what others may have said earlier. I have a number of specific questions but I must leave at noon. One of the recommendations of the pay commission was to review recruitment. Will the Minister of State provide an update on this review? What is the timescale? How long will it take? The Minister of State has established a strategic HR group that will help the organisation in the long run. Will he give an update on these questions.

Many measures have been taken to increase the earnings of members of the Defence Forces and we have discussed them at length this morning. They include pay agreement increases, pay commission recommendations and the implementation of outstanding adjudications. What is the total cost of this? Perhaps the Minister of State is in a position to give some details. Something that has been highlighted, and I do not want to repeat it, is the starting pay of a three star private, which is the starting rank in the Defence Forces. It has been criticised as very low. Will the Minister of State outline how much he envisages these increases being in the current year

and how much they were in recent years?

**Chairman:** A query that came to us via the Committee on Public Petitions is whether there are plans to increase the upper age limit for recruitment of officer cadets, Naval Service recruits and apprentices? When we compare the age limits for An Garda Síochána and members of the defence forces in Britain and the US, they are higher than ours. Is this being considered?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I will come back to the Chairman specifically on that issue.

**Chairman:** Perfect.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I will try to go through all of the questions. There are a number of them and some of them overlap. Senator Craughwell asked about the Lariam issue. The first case heard in the High Court was on 3 November 2017 and the matter was settled on 30 November 2017 without admission or liability. The next Lariam case was listed for hearing on 15 March 2019 and the case was settled and struck out with no admission of liability. The reason for settlement was very specific in that particular case. A further case commenced on 21 June 2019 and on 3 July 2019 that case was withdrawn by the plaintiffs. It was struck out with no order. No further Lariam cases are listed for hearing this year.

As the committee knows, a working group on Lariam was set up and has reviewed developments in the context of the Defence Forces' use of malarial chemoprophylaxis. The working group obtained advice from leading national and international medical experts. The working group's report was submitted to the Minister and the report was produced in the context of current potential litigation, which is legally privileged as I hope the committee understands. The report made a total of 12 recommendations, which are intended to ensure the Defence Forces' medical policies and practice continue to develop in light of best practice. Many of the recommendations focus on planning, training, education and training for information sharing as well as the establishment of the medical advisory group. I have accepted the recommendations of the working group and established an implementation group. The work is ongoing. Given that litigation is pending, it would be totally inappropriate of me to comment further on this issue other than to say that the medical advice from the military is that Lariam is used where appropriate. That is decided by the medical people in the Department, not me.

A question was asked about the fisherman's tax credit. I believe it was introduced in 2017 but I stand to be corrected and if I am incorrect, I will come back on the issue. The tax credit for members of the Naval Service who spend more than 80 days at sea is a positive step forward. It does not address all of the issues and challenges we have but it is part of addressing them. We cannot touch core pay because of the public service stability agreement but pay will be reviewed in 2020. The tax credit is something I was asked about by PDFORRA and military management. The Department worked closely with PDFORRA and military management in putting together a submission to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Last week, I was delighted that the Minister for Finance brought a-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Why did we have to wait?

**Chairman:** We are very short of time.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Rome was not built in a day. This has been going on for the past 12 to 18 months and I am delighted it has been done now. Military management and the representative association looked for this. This came to my attention in the past 18 months.

Two pilots have returned and more pilots are to return. Regarding the allowances specifically for people in the Air Corps, this is going through conciliation and arbitration at present. It would be wrong of me to comment further on it. It has to do with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform because it has to do with core pay and allowances. I do not make decisions on allowances. I have been given the advice by military management and the General Officer Commanding, GOC, that the air ambulance service will be back up and running from 1 March 2020. It came to my attention earlier this year that we had challenges and we agreed we would take it out of service four days per month. I have been given an absolute commitment by the GOC and military management that if we were able to take it out of service for four days in November, December, January and February, the service would get back up and running.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** It is guaranteed to be back.

**Chairman:** Please.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Following the launch of the air ambulance service in 2012, RACO submitted a claim for lieutenants and captains tasked with flying the helicopter service. The public service pay agreements do not allow for a cost increase in claims. Instead of introducing a new allowance, it was agreed through conciliation and arbitration to pay the pilots the equivalent of the security duty allowance, SDA, for this duty. In 2019, RACO submitted a claim for the allowance to be extended to commandants and lieutenants colonel tasked to perform duties. SDA is normally paid to officers at commandant rank and above. Payments of SDA to commandants ceased in October 1990 arising from recommendations in the report of the Gleeson commission. A limited number of commandants are paid SDA where their appointment is brigadier or equivalent duty. An offer was made to RACO to pay the equivalent SDA to commandants. As stated, the matter is still ongoing through the CNA scheme.

I mentioned the tax credit. The loss of recruits is a long-term issue. On average, 22% do not complete training but this goes back years and it is not a new phenomenon of the past two, three or four years. People come into the Army and they often do not get what they expect. For anybody who goes into a job, whether in the Garda, the Army or elsewhere, while pay might be an issue, I do not believe it is the biggest issue. I am sure that everybody going into a new job looks at the pay scales and at what they are going to get after one year, when their training is completed, or after year two, three or four, and at what are the possibilities of remaining and what they can get out of it. I do not believe pay is the biggest issue when a person leaves during training.

It is an issue I ask commanding officers about all of the time and they tell me they believe military life is not suitable for all people and some may not be able for the robustness of it. Training can be very robust and some people just do not like it. If it is not suitable for them, it is better that we lose them during training, rather than training them and then having them leave three or four months after training. If we lose them during training, most of the time, we are able to get somebody else in to replace them.

I stated in the Dáil seven or eight months ago that I wanted a review of recruitment. It was one of the recommendations in the high-level implementation plan and the independent pay commission. I had already stated I was going to have a review and Mr. Pádraig Love has been appointed to that. There is a process going through, although I will not give the committee a definitive time as to when I expect that report.

With regard to the specialties, the technician pay review is under way and it is in the high-

level implementation plan. The provision for identifying further incentivised measures will be linked to the next pay agreement and it is also in the high-level implementation plan. We are putting a plan in place so when we go to the next phase of the public service pay talks, we will have a good case to make in and around the recruitment and retention challenges in the Defence Forces.

The Deputy knows I cannot change core pay, which is a matter for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. If the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, in the mid-life of the public service stability agreement, changes core pay, the Deputy will be the first to ask why teachers, nurses and gardaí do not get the same. The public service stability agreement concludes in 2020. There will be a renegotiation of the plan and I very much look forward to that.

We have a big job of work to do in putting a very strong case together for members of the Defence Forces so we get the best outcome from that. Whatever that outcome, I feel everybody needs to put their shoulder to the wheel. Anybody will know about the challenges, which are out there in the media. I have never hidden the challenges we have within the Defence Forces.

**Chairman:** There were questions from Deputies O'Loughlin and Mitchell.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** In response to Deputy O'Loughlin, I have never distorted the figures. The figures are there-----

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** The Minister of State accused others of making gross distortions.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** No, I do not believe I have ever said that. I answered Senator McFadden in regard to the infrastructure at the Curragh and I thank her for acknowledging the work that is ongoing. I have acknowledged the point on pay rates with other members. What was the Deputy's exact question on the Army Ranger Wing?

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** There was a pay agreement in 2008 that has never been implemented.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I announced part of that in July of this year.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** Only part of it.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** There is a case going forward. The agreed back payment was to 1 October 2018. In the context of payments before that date, PDFORRA has indicated it will pursue this. That is a matter for PDFORRA to pursue on behalf of the Army Ranger Wing.

People talk about me being a full Minister, half Minister or whatever sort of Minister. I am absolutely and totally committed to this job. I attend every Cabinet meeting, the very same as senior Ministers such as Deputies Flanagan, Humphreys and Creed and everyone else. The only thing I am not able to do at Cabinet is vote. I have been a member of the Cabinet since 2011 and not once since then has a vote been taken. The Chairman of the committee was a member of Cabinet and I do not believe a vote was taken during his time either. If we go back over the years, a vote has never been taken at Cabinet.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** Who mentioned votes?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I have the very same influence at Cabinet.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I did not mention votes. What about influence over the budget?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** If we look at the budget, is the first time since 2006 or 2007 that there has been two or three years in a row when the budget is over €1 billion.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** It is the lowest allocation to a Department in the budget.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** The Deputy is totally incorrect. I know from where she is getting her figures. The people who gave her that figure have an ulterior motive. I can tell her one thing: their motive is not to strengthen the Defence Forces. What they want to do is weaken the Defence Forces. An awful lot of these people on social media want to weaken the Defence Forces. They have an axe to grind. I will continue to do my job.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I do not know what the Minister of State is referring to.

**Chairman:** Deputy Mitchell had several questions. We are over time.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Deputy Heydon contacted me in respect of the secondary school at the Curragh Camp on a number of occasions. A great deal of work is taking place.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** The Deputy is not here to ask the question, I am.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** There is ongoing work involving the Department of Education and Skills, my Department and the Defence Forces. I thank the Deputy, who I met in respect of that issue with a cross-party delegation. The Curragh Camp is a working military camp, so we just cannot go in and plant a school in the middle of it.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I accept that.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Everybody accepts that. It is a question of getting the right site. The GOC and military management have to look at what they need in the Curragh Camp over the next five, ten and 20 years. We cannot build a school and then find that, in three or five years, we regret it.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** The Minister of State accepts it but it is a year later.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I can reassure the Deputy. Whether it is the Department of Defence, military management or the Curragh Camp, we are doing a favour by giving a site to build a school.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** Can the Minister of State confirm that a site is being provided?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** There are ongoing negotiations between the Department of Education and Skills, my Department and military management on that issue.

I will go through Deputy Mitchell's questions as quickly as I can.

**Chairman:** The Minister of State has three minutes.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** With regard to the EOD, I have stated on numerous occasions that we have challenges. However, never once have we not been able to respond to a request by the Garda.

I cannot give the Deputy a "Yes" or "No" answer on the food budget. However, I can reas-

sure her that the quality of food in barracks across the country is of top standard and I do not believe there are any cutbacks in that area. There was a multimillion investment this year in the dining hall for members of the Defence Forces in Athlone.

I hear this thing about members of the Defence Forces having to sleep in their cars on a regular basis. No one has ever come to me on this. I have asked for these people to be brought to me, if they have to sleep in their cars. I want to hear from them; I want to talk to them. I have said that for three years and no one has come to me and said they have to sleep in their car every night because they are unable to do X, Y or Z. It is something I read on social media but I do not believe everything on social media.

In the context of members of the Naval Service, personnel on ships have time off. This may be a mistake. When people are out at sea, they are on shift or off shift, so even though they are on ships, they are not working on a full-time basis. That is why we want to reflect the tax allowance I mentioned last week. This is to reflect the commitment that members of the Naval Service give, and I will continue to do that. The State is not taking advantage of any members of the Defence Forces. I want to be able to do more but I do not have full responsibility for pay. All this work - the high-level implementation plan, the independent pay commission, looking after the lower-paid, the restoration of allowances - is to reflect the commitment of members of the Defence Forces. Absolutely nobody is taking advantage of members of the Defence Forces.

To respond to Deputy McLoughlin, who has left the meeting, regarding the pay commission, the review of recruitment is ongoing. Mr. Pádraig Love has been appointed to carry out that process. I went through the pay of members of enlisted ranks earlier.

I heard Deputy O'Loughlin on the radio this morning saying we are handing back millions of euro. That is totally untrue, totally incorrect-----

**Chairman:** How much went unspent in 2018?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Deputy O'Loughlin is wrong.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** The responses to the parliamentary questions are wrong then.

**Chairman:** We will deal with this in the select committee meeting in a few minutes.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I will give the committee the figures for 2014 to 2018, inclusive. In all those years 0.09% of the total budget was handed back. That is €4.2 million handed back. The Chairman has been a Minister. He understands where appropriations in aid come in and the way in which they are handled. Of our budget, which is based on fact, €4.2 million, or 0.09%, has been handed back. That is the figure from 2014 to 2018, inclusive. That is the group Vote we have. Deputy O'Loughlin's position is totally incorrect. I want to correct the record in that regard.

**Chairman:** Each year the Minister of State has come before the committee with a Supplementary Estimate to move money to pay for pensions.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Yes, but that-----

**Chairman:** Therefore, the figures for the beginning of the year are not reflected at the end of the year. In reality, then, the Department's projected expenditure in respect of pensions has been wrong each year. Is that not why we meet in December each year, to move money?

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**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I will say that at our next meeting-----

**Chairman:** The way in which this has been presented is incorrect.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** The Chairman is wrong. I cannot say that I will have 300 or 400 people retiring-----

**Chairman:** The Minister of State has a fair idea.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** We do not.

**Chairman:** He sure does.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** One gives an estimate-----

**Chairman:** There is a pattern each year.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** From 2014 to 2018, inclusive, the total that has been handed back from the group Vote is €4.28 million, which equates to 0.09%. I see this on social media and heard it on the radio this morning. If we are to give out figures, we should ensure we give the correct ones. It should not be said we are handing back €20 million or €30 million. That is totally-----

**Chairman:** As Deputy O'Loughlin said, the figures are based on replies to parliamentary questions.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I absolutely assure Deputy O'Loughlin that is-----

**Chairman:** We will deal with this at the next meeting, which will commence in a few minutes. The Minister of State has officials taking notes. There were a number of questions he did not get to because of the time constraints. We would like written answers to those to be ready for the next joint committee meeting on Tuesday, 17 December. A number of issues were not replied to. The reason for the time constraint of this meeting is that we have facilitated the Department by having a select committee meeting on the Supplementary Estimates at 12.15 p.m. I thank the Minister of State and all the members who contributed to this very important discussion on various issues.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.15 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 17 December 2019.