

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS CUMARSÁID

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

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*Déardaoin, 18 Samhain 2021*

*Thursday, 18 November 2021*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

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The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála /Deputies	Seanadóirí /Senators
Joe Carey,	Jerry Buttimer,
Cathal Crowe,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Michael Lowry,	Timmy Dooley,
Darren O'Rourke,	Gerry Horkan.
Ruairí Ó Murchú.	

I láthair/In attendance: Deputies Michael McNamara and Matt Shanahan and Senator Martin Conway.

Teachta/Deputy Kieran O'Donnell sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Irish Coast Guard: Discussion**

**Chairman:** Apologies have been received from Deputy Matthews. Today's meeting is about obtaining an overview of the role of the Irish Coast Guard. Our purpose is to engage with representatives from the Department of Transport and the Irish Coast Guard to discuss this role. On behalf of the committee, I welcome from the Department of Transport, Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe, assistant secretary, Mr. Liam Keogh, principal officer, and Mr. Phil O'Flaherty, principal officer; and from the Irish Coast Guard, Mr. Eugene Clonan, acting director, and Mr. Niall Ferns, manager. Our guests are welcome and I thank them for accepting our invitation at such short notice.

Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. If their statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identified person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction. For witnesses attending remotely, outside of the Leinster House campus, there are some limitations to parliamentary privilege. As such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness physically present does. Witnesses participating in this committee session from a jurisdiction outside the State are advised that they should also be mindful of their domestic law and how it might apply to the evidence they give.

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

Members and witnesses have the option of being physically present in the committee room or to join the meeting remotely via Microsoft Teams. I remind members of the constitutional requirement that they must be physically present within the confines of the Leinster House complex to participate in public meetings. Reluctantly, I will not permit members to participate where they are not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts will be asked to leave the meeting. In this regard, I ask any member participating via Microsoft Teams, prior to making his or her contribution to the meeting, to confirm that he or she is on the grounds of the Leinster House campus. If attending in the committee room, you are asked to exercise personal responsibility to protect yourself and others from the risk of contracting Covid-19. I strongly advise the practice of good hand hygiene and to leave at least one vacant seat between you and others attending. You should also always maintain an appropriate level of social distancing during and after the meeting. Masks should be worn at all times during the meeting except when speaking.

I call Ms O'Keeffe to make her opening statement.

**Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe:** I thank the Chair and the committee for the opportunity to come here today for this discussion on the Irish Coast Guard. Let me begin by introducing the team here today. My name is Deirdre O'Keeffe and I am the assistant secretary with responsibility for maritime transport in the Department of Transport. I am accompanied this morning by Mr. Eugene Clonan, who is acting as director of the Coast Guard, by Mr. Niall Ferns, who is a manager in the Coast Guard, and by Mr. Liam Keogh and Mr. Phil O'Flaherty, who are principal officers in the Department, with responsibilities in the area generally.

I will make a brief opening statement to explain how the Coast Guard fits within the Department of Transport and the national search and rescue system generally. Mr. Clonan will then make an opening statement providing an overview of the Irish Coast Guard, as requested in the meeting invitation.

I will begin with how the Irish Coast Guard fits within the Department of Transport. The Coast Guard is a division of the Irish Maritime Directorate, which comprises all the parts of the Department that deal with maritime transport. Our mission is a safe, sustainable maritime transport sector which will facilitate maritime transport services and the safe use of the maritime environment, meet our international obligations and domestic needs, deliver a world-class emergency response service and promote and protect Ireland's economic interests as an island nation. A key element of this is an effective maritime emergency response across the three areas of search and rescue, maritime casualty and pollution response. Mr. Clonan will go into more detail on each of these areas in his opening statement.

In July 2019, the then Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport published a new national search and rescue plan aimed at placing Ireland at the forefront of international best practice in the area of search and rescue. The general aim of the plan is to make our search and rescue services better and safer for all those involved. As part of this work, a new National Search and Rescue Committee was established to provide strategic co-ordination, guidance and leadership for search and rescue in Ireland. A key aim was the rebalancing of the previous maritime-centric search and rescue framework to encompass land and air search and rescue more comprehensively.

The Irish Coast Guard operates within the general framework set by the national search and rescue plan and is a key participant in the deliberations of the National Search and Rescue Committee. The Irish Coast Guard has been engaged in a considerable programme of change over recent years. This programme, which is continuing, is designed to provide a safer and more effective search and rescue service to all concerned, both those members of the public who may benefit from the service from time to time, and the members of the Coast Guard organisation, whether full-time employees or volunteers, who are involved in providing the service. While the programme will provide a better and safer service for all concerned as it rolls out, the roll-out of the programme itself, like any organisational change programme, provides some challenges, both for those involved in rolling it out and those affected by it.

In recent weeks, members will have heard of disharmony among some volunteers in one of the Coast Guard volunteer units on the Irish coast. We would like to reassure members that the Coast Guard, both head office staff and local management in the area, have been working tirelessly to address the problems experienced in this unit and will continue to do so, with a view to restoring the service in the area as quickly as possible. Members will be aware that Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton undertook to provide further mediation in this regard on an urgent basis, and indeed the mediator, Mr. Kieran Mulvey, has already been appointed. Plans are in hand for his meetings with the volunteers early next week.

It is also worth pointing out that the 900 or so Coast Guard volunteers around the Irish coast, who do heroic voluntary work on behalf of the Irish people, have several channels available to them to make their views, positive or negative, known to their local volunteer management or to management generally. This is because their views from the ground are extremely important to inform decisions and developments in the area. In particular, the volunteer representative organization, the Coastal Unit Advisory Group, represents all 900 volunteers through a committee including both elected volunteers and their local management. This group, which has been

in place for some 20 years, was reviewed at the request of the volunteers in recent years to be even more responsive to the concerns and suggestions of volunteers.

The Coast Guard is a significant buyer of products and services. For this reason, a review of the Coast Guard procurement process, as part of the organisational change programme, has been under way for some time. This review has identified some shortcomings in the Coast Guard's procurement processes and actions have been taken, particularly in the areas of staffing, training and new protocols over recent years, to address these. There are also a number of legacy issues which we have been tackling and will continue to tackle over the coming months to ensure that any gaps or deficiencies are identified, rectified and, where necessary, dealt with. Our aim is to ensure that all procurements are conducted in accordance with all legal and administrative arrangements to ensure that the correct procedures are followed. Our monitoring, compliance, awareness and education frameworks are being improved as we seek to ensure that the smallest procurements are treated with the same rigour, thoroughness and attention to detail as the largest procurements.

I would also like to take the opportunity to mention the final report of the Air Accident Investigation Unit, AAIU, into the Rescue 116 air accident, which was published recently. Once again, I want to extend the Department's heartfelt sympathy to the families of Captain Dara Fitzpatrick, Captain Mark Duffy, Mr. Ciaran Smith and Mr. Paul Ormsby, who were close working colleagues of many members of the Irish Coast Guard. The Minister has already confirmed that the Department fully accepts the recommendations contained in the report. Given the size and complexity of the report, the Department will require some time to fully examine in detail the report's findings and recommendations. However, it will respond to the chief inspector of air accidents in respect of each safety recommendation addressed to the Minister in advance of the deadlines set.

I conclude my opening statement and will pass to Mr. Eugene Clonan, who is acting as director of the Irish Coast Guard, to present his opening statement.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I have some feedback in my headset, can everyone hear me clearly?

**Chairman:** Yes, initially it was not great, but it is okay now.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I thank the Chairman and the committee for the invitation to attend here today. This is an excellent opportunity to engage with the committee on what we do, the work programme ahead of us and the challenges we face as Ireland's search and rescue, ship casualty and pollution response service. Before taking questions from members, I would like to take a few minutes to set out the international context of our work, the overview of our remit, our organisation and the challenges we face.

The International Convention for the Safety Of Life At Sea, SOLAS, relating to search and rescue services, provides that each contracting government undertakes to ensure that necessary arrangements are made for distress communication and co-ordination in its area of responsibility and for the rescue of persons in distress at sea around its coasts. The Coast Guard's role is to discharge Ireland's search and rescue, SAR, obligations by implementing the national SAR plan and the national oil spill contingency plan for all incidents occurring in the maritime domain, or as otherwise requested by SAR authorities in other domains, such as on land, in the air or indeed at our next door neighbours in the UK. Under the framework for emergency management, the Coast Guard is nominated as one of the State's principal emergency services, along with An Garda Síochána, the fire service and the ambulance service. The framework assigns

the Coast Guard responsibility for co-ordinating the response to marine incident outside port limits, except in the case of search and rescue, when all marine areas including ports are under its remit.

On marine pollution, we have a suite of legislation, the Sea Pollution Acts 1991 to 2006, under which the Minister for Transport has appointed officers of the Coast Guard as authorised officers to enable them to carry out their duties in cases of maritime casualties to prevent or minimise damage from pollution where these casualties pose a threat of major harm to the coastline and related interests. The Sea Pollution Act also implements the framework for the International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Co-operation. OPRC, which establishes measures for dealing with marine pollution incidents nationally and in co-operation with other countries. The Sea Pollution Act requires a national oil spill contingency plan, along with county council and port authority contingency plans, in accordance with the regime set out in the International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Co-operation, OPRC. This includes risk assessments exercising. Additionally, European Communities (Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information System) Regulations 2010, gives the Coast Guard powers to act in maritime casualties and ships requesting a place of refuge. The Coast Guard also provides a maritime assistance service to vessels at sea in need of assistance.

I will talk about where we are today. The organisation stands at approximately 82 full-time staff at five locations around the country and approximately 900 Coast Guard volunteers at 44 locations, all of whom are working together to save lives at sea and protect the marine environment from maritime casualties. Earlier this year, the Coast Guard intervened in a number of marine casualties, most notably the *MV Lilly B* off Hook Head. In 2020, the Coast Guard responded to 2,600 incidents.

The Coast Guard attaches particular attention to what it categorises as lives saved, which means assistance provided that prevented a loss of life, severe risk to life or protracted hospitalisation. In 2020, the Coast Guard recorded that 391 individuals were categorised as lives saved. In quarter three of this year, the Coast Guard responded to 1,089 incidents and saved 121 lives.

Actions included co-ordinating incidents in the search and rescue co-ordination centres at Dublin, Valentia and Malin, deploying on scene; rescuing persons in distress; training and exercising with other principal emergency services; managing and supporting the Coast Guard volunteer units; maintaining the marine radio infrastructure; procurement and management of stores and services; providing assistance to other mariners and the public; supporting the Department's work to keep essential goods moving; and supporting the HSE during the pandemic.

In performing our responsibilities, we provide a variety of services. We provide the marine radio distress listening service; we co-ordinate search and rescue, SAR; we monitor maritime traffic within the traffic separation schemes off Tuskar and Fastnet lighthouses; we provide a marine assistance service; we monitor the Irish exclusive economic zone, EEZ, for ship casualties; we provide a national marine radio network for sending out safety messages and navigation warnings; we operate the automatic identification system with transponders for aircrafts that are accepted for ships; and we provide support on request to statutory agencies, bodies and emergency services.

To carry out these functions, the Coast Guard is organised into four sections. I will start with Coast Guard operations. We have three rescue co-ordination centres, RCCs. which are based at Dublin, Valentia and Malin Head. These centres are responsible for listening to the stress frequencies, responding to 999 calls and for search and rescue co-ordination. They pro-

vide maritime safety broadcasts such as weather and navigation warnings, respond to ship casualty operations and investigate pollution reports. The current staffing complement of operations are 57 staff members, which includes 51 members to maintain a 24-7 watch coverage at these three centres. Although there are 57 staff members, at each of these three centres there are three people on watch 24-7; it takes that number of staff to maintain that standard of manning.

To respond to the marine incidents on the coast, the RCCs have a number of resources to call upon, including the Coast Guard rescue helicopters. Coast Guard helicopter services are provided under contract by the company CHC Ireland, operating a fleet of Sikorsky S-92 helicopters out of four bases in Dublin, Shannon, Waterford and Sligo. Helicopter services are on 15 minutes' notice by day and 45 minutes' notice by night. In 2020, they were called out 781 times. In quarter three of this year, which was a busy period for us, there were 315 missions, of which 137 were search and rescue in the maritime area and 55 were medical evacuations from offshore islands. With search and rescue inland, we responded with assistance from An Garda Síochána on 78 occasions. We also assisted the National Ambulance Service on 19 occasions.

Another service we can call upon to assist us in search and rescue is the Royal National Lifeboat Institute, RNLI. The RNLI is categorised as a declared resource to the Coast Guard which means that each individual station can be directly requested to respond to individual incidents. The RNLI maintains 38 lifeboats on the island of Ireland and is manned by volunteers. In 2020, we called it out 783 times.

We have 44 Coast Guard units around the coast, and in 2020 we called on them 1,270 times. Their basic function is search on the coast, and some of them have a boat rescue function, a cliff function and they have unmanned aerial vehicles, UAV, that is, drones, for aerial searches.

The Coast Guard units and supports section is responsible for the management, resourcing and training of the volunteer Coast Guard units. The volunteer units provide local maritime emergency response. There are 44 Coast Guard units around the coast, made up solely of volunteers from the local communities. There are approximately 900 volunteers in all. The Coast Guard units provide a coastal search capability on the shore. In addition to the coastal search, some units are trained to provide cliff rescue, boat rescue and also UAV search capability, as I mentioned earlier.

The Coast Guard units are also available to enhance community resilience during emergencies such as Storms Emma or Ophelia, in supporting the principal response or principal emergency services. The volunteer units are managed by the Coast Guard units and supports section, which includes six staff on the coast managing the volunteer units directly and four staff in Dublin, supported by a further seven staff from the maritime strategy and governance division in the Department. Each Coast Guard volunteer unit is composed of a volunteer officer in charge, OIC, deputy OIC, training officer, equipment officer, administration officer and education officer. That is how they are organised. The complement of each unit ranges from 12 to 25 volunteers, depending on their range function.

The engineering and logistics section manages the radio communications infrastructure in the communication centres and also the radio aerial infrastructure around the coast to maintain marine VHF and HF coverage in the search and rescue region. VHF channel 16 and HF frequencies are used for distress listening and calling and working channels; that is what the radio network is for. The engineering section also manages the Coast Guard stores in Blanchardstown. There are nine staff employed in this area with another two staff in the pipeline.

The Coast Guard safety, quality and compliance section's responsibility is to integrate all Coast Guard processes into a single management system, thereafter called the quality management system, QMS. Once established, it will ensure the Coast Guard operates in compliance with each QMS component. Doing so aids in ensuring operational consistency and provides Coast Guard stakeholders and those at the receiving end of SAR services assurance that the organisation is being managed in accordance with best practice in both safety and service delivery.

The Coast Guard's success depends largely on the goodwill of volunteers from the RNLI and from its own Coast Guard volunteers to give of their time and become professional responders in maritime lifesaving situations. In return, the Coast Guard provides its volunteers excellent training and equipment to carry out that task.

Recent tragic accidents have been difficult for the organisation. We mourn the loss of close and valued colleagues and friends. I would like to take this opportunity to extend again our sympathy to the families of Rescue 116 and to Mr. Bernard Lucas and family. We are also compelled to honour their memories by delivering a world class search and rescue, maritime casualty and pollution response services.

I hope this provided a quick overview of who we are and what we are about. I am more than happy to take questions from the committee.

**Chairman:** Thank you very much, Mr. Clonan. I will now move to members. Fianna Fáil will start with Deputy Cathal Crowe, who has eight minutes.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** At the outset, it is a pity that the witnesses are all appearing here this morning via virtual link. I understand that is an option afforded to the witnesses, but a lot of what we will hear about today is about the geographic, and indeed, the operational disconnect that people feel there is with the Irish Coast Guard. The Irish Coast Guard is headquartered on Leeson Lane, Dublin 2. That is a long way from Doolin, Kilkee, Valentia and the various other Coast Guard stations, and therein lies one of the problems. There is a disconnect. It would be far more helpful if the witnesses had been here this morning. In this very room yesterday, we had representatives from the Irish Heart Foundation and the Irish Cancer Society sitting here. Given that Leinster House is located only around the corner from the headquarters of the Irish Coast Guard, it would have been significant if the witnesses had appeared in person.

One of the main matters I wish to focus on this morning relates to the Doolin Coast Guard station, which, regrettably, is closed at the moment. There are two issues at hand, in respect of one of which we are hopefully on a pathway towards some resolution. I refer to the internal personnel and HR issues. I was delighted to see Kieran Mulvey appointed as mediator. Several of the members here would have been looking for that. Last week, I met with the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Hildegarde Naughton. I am glad to hear that mediation will begin on Monday next at 6 p.m. I encourage all volunteers who are active or have left to engage with the process. Mr. Mulvey is skilled and competent and he has a track record of unlocking very difficult impasse situations. I hope that he can make inroads on that issue.

There is another personnel issue, not just within the station but also between it and headquarters in Dublin. I want to address that for a moment. Recently, the Irish Coast Guard Volunteers Representative Association, ICGVRA, was established. It is headed up by a man named John O'Mahony with whom I have been in regular contact over the past few days. This organisation has been set up for many reasons. One of those reasons is that "Irish Coast Guard members are

afraid to raise issues in coast guard units, or with management, for fear of retribution by way of disciplinary action". That is very worrying. Much of the media focus and public discourse has focused on what could be an internal problem at Doolin Coast Guard station, which, I believe, will be ironed out. However, the quote I just read into the record signifies that there are far deeper problems and that these run on a vertical axis from headquarters right down not just to Doolin station but to all the spokes of the wheel, namely, all stations. I have heard repeatedly over the past week that there are not just problems in Doolin, rather, there are problems in each Coast Guard station.

There are two things I wish to hear from Ms O’Keeffe and her team this morning. First, will she immediately recognise and engage with the ICGVRA? The latter has levelled some serious allegations and concerns. We need to recognise that organisation, bring it into the fold and engage with it. The Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, has agreed to meet with individuals, but I am of the view that this representative organisation needs to be recognised today and met as a matter of urgency. From what I have been hearing over the past week - and this is not personal, this is the organisation we are talking about - there appears to be some form of organisational rot at play. I propose to the committee that there be an independent and urgent inquiry into how that vertical axis from Irish Coast Guard management down to stations works, and that we also look at the failures of the Department of Transport. There are a number of background contexts to this, namely: the Rescue 116 report, which we debated in the Dáil Chamber last night; there is the issue relating to Doolin; and there are issues at Coast Guard stations throughout the country. The committee needs to agree to seek an independent inquiry into these issues and how the organisation functions.

Ms O’Keeffe referred to measures the Irish Coast Guard is taking to transform the structures and the stations throughout the country. She stated: “While the programme will provide a better and safer service for all concerned as it rolls out, the roll-out of the programme itself, like any organisational change programme, provides some challenges, both for those involved in rolling it out and those affected by it.” I wish to highlight a few ways that this is manifesting itself at local level. In Doolin station, there have been resignations in the past three weeks. Those involved are not people who took resigning lightly. They are highly valued, highly skilled individually. Collectively, there is more than 170 years of experience at that station. Some of the competencies they have always fulfilled have been diluted in recent weeks. Some of them are now scratching their heads wondering what is the point of the unit existing and what is the point of serving there in light of some of the competencies that headquarters has taken from them. They can no longer use the reinforced steel girder in their station that they previously used for climbing training. They used to attach ropes to it and use it as a climbing and descending mechanism. They can no longer use a bolting system when they climb in the Burren. That has also been taken from them. Some part of the Cliffs of Moher are out of bounds - and I could not believe this when I heard it a week ago - they cannot go near them. They can no longer scale cliff sections while tethered to the rescue jeep. Most alarmingly, the Kilkee lifeboat cannot launch beyond the bay area. This appears to be on foot of a decision taken by the Irish Coast Guard directly in response to the tragic death of Caitríona Lucas in 2016. That manifested itself locally last summer when two young people who went out swimming went missing in the water and the Coast Guard unit could not leave the bay area. It fell to local fishermen and boaters to go out beyond the bay area in their vessels to look for them. That is ineptitude, not on the part of the volunteers but on the part of the management, which took these competencies and skills that the volunteers have been able to fulfil-----

**Chairman:** Time is running short so I ask the Deputy to put the questions and allow the

witnesses respond.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** There is an urgent need to reopen the Doolin Coast Guard station. The volunteers there live locally and have a response time of minutes. The other stakeholders who now provide cover are too far away. Kilkee coast guard unit is 55 km away, Ennistymon fire brigade is 18 km away and the Civil Defence in Ennis is 32 km away. Most worryingly of all, the Aran Islands lifeboat which, operating in average sea conditions, takes a full hour to launch and be at sea. The Doolin launch time is approximately 15 minutes. The 12 volunteers who remain at Doolin are highly skilled. There are many competencies they can still fulfil. I ask that, in the interests of public safety, the station be reopened as a matter of urgency.

**Chairman:** The questions for Ms O’Keeffe are recognition the ICGVRA and the issue relating to Doolin Coast Guard station.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** On the ICGVRA, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, Coast Guard volunteers have a representative organisation, namely, the Coastal Unit Advisory Group, CUAG. This has been in place for 20 years or so, but in 2018, at the request of Coast Guard volunteers, the terms of reference were reviewed to enable better representation for all the volunteers and the Irish Coast Guard. There are elected members of the volunteer organisation on that committee now, as well as local management. That organisation has been in place for some time. As I understand it, the Minister of State’s office has been in touch with the organisation the Deputy mentioned. The Minister of State has renewed her commitment to keep in touch with all of the volunteers.

There are a range of other ways in which the volunteers can have their issues, whether positive or negative, reflected to local management and to management more generally in head office. In response to something Deputy Crowe mentioned at the beginning of his intervention, I might ask Mr. Clonan to give some sense of how the organisation is organised at local level right around the coast because it is important to say that there is representation right around the coast. The organisation has a range of procedures whereby Coast Guard volunteers can have their views, whether positive or negative, reflected to management, whether it is their local management or management more generally. This is because we are concerned to ensure that any comments, whether positive or negative, are reflected and can be dealt with in the best possible way.

What was the second question?

**Chairman:** The second question relates to reopening the Doolin-----

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Chairman, it relates to the dilution of competencies to the point whereby the volunteers cannot fulfil all their functions. I want to know why that has happened.

**Chairman:** Ms O’Keeffe has asked Mr. Clonan to deal with the organisational aspect. I ask her to deal with the substantive issue of reopening the Doolin Coast Guard station.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I will ask Mr. Clonan to deal with the competency issue as well as the organisation around the coast. In light of recent developments, for safety reasons, the team concerned had to be taken off the board. This was done for very good safety reasons, for the volunteers and for the public they serve in a very selfless and heroic way. This was a proportionate response having regard to the significant ongoing attempts by the Coast Guard to address the unfortunate differences that have existed in this particular unit for a number of years. The action was taken to ensure the safety of the volunteers themselves. It was also in compli-

ance with search and rescue assurance obligations set out in the national search and rescue plan.

This does not mean a service is not available in the area. All the other Coast Guard units, shoreline and cliff rescue services remain in place, along with the four search and rescue Coast Guard helicopters. The RNLI, the community rescue boats and the Naval Service will continue to assist, particularly in those areas of greatest risk, until all the issues have been resolved.

I reiterate that with the appointment of the mediator, Mr. Kieran Mulvey, and with that work moving on quickly to the early part of next week, we hope those issues will be resolved. The team will go back on the board when it is safe for the volunteers and the community they serve to do so. We are working as hard as we can to ensure this happens as quickly as possible.

**Chairman:** Mr. Clonan will now deal with the other issues.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** Yes, Mr. Clonan will discuss the other issues raised.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The volunteers are highly trained and highly valued within the Coast Guard. I want to put that on record. We have been working with them for the past 30 years and more. The Coast Guard units on the coast have gone from strength to strength but functions have increased. The basis of our operation is the Coast Guard code, which sets out what we expect from volunteers and what volunteers expect from us. Operating in the marine environment is hazardous, particularly in what we ask the volunteers to do. We ask them to go out and rescue people who have got into distress. To enable them to do that job we have a safety management system to keep them safe. None of my people nor any volunteers are sent out to harm themselves. The policies and procedures are in place to protect and keep them safe. In all the training volunteers receive from search and manual handling to cliff work and bolt work, they have to complete a myriad of courses to acquire the qualities-----

**Chairman:** That is fine. The specific question here is on the dilution of the duties that volunteers can carry out and the line of command from the centralised base in Dublin. I ask Mr. Clonan to deal with the dilution of duties.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** What I am doing is I am standing up the training and the safety management system. This is all done in-house or on courses at weekends. The chain of command in an incident is through the marine rescue co-ordination centre, MRCC, directly tasking the unit to the officer in command in the Coast Guard units and support section. These are the managers that support the teams to ensure the equipment, training, safety management systems, audits and HR issues are all in place.

On the issue of people complaining and this, that and the other that we are hearing in the media, in the last-----

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Chairman, we need to hear about the dilution of duties and only that.

**Chairman:** I ask Mr. Clonan to deal only with the dilution issue. It is a very pertinent issue for the volunteers. Why has there been a dilution of duties?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I do not understand the Chairman’s question when he refers to a “dilution of duties”. At the moment, all the teams other than the Doolin team are up and running with their search capabilities, their-----

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** We are under tight time constraints. I want to know why the climb-

ing training facility at Doolin Coast Guard station and the use of the bolting system in the Burren are no longer available. Volunteers can no longer descend cliffs for a long rope rescue, scale a cliff while tethered to a jeep or launch the Kilkee lifeboat beyond the bay area. That amounts to a dilution of the duties. What happens at the moment if someone stumbles on the footpath at Kilkee cliff is that any good Samaritan can help. However, if someone has the misfortune to tumble over the edge of the cliff, nobody in the county, whether the Coast Guard or anyone else, has the competence to carry out a rescue because of the dilution of duties.

**Chairman:** Will Mr. Clonan deal with that issue, please?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I understand the question now, Chairman, and the particular dilution of duties the Deputy has outlined. I will pass the question to the Coast Guard unit and support manager, Mr. Ferns, who is closer to that area than I am.

**Mr. Niall Ferns:** I will clarify some of the issues that were listed. In regard to geographical restrictions on the boat in Kilkee, they have been removed for some time now. The D-class vessel has been fully operational in Kilkee since August 2020 and the Delta RIB has been fully operational in Kilkee since July of this year. In regard to access to certain parts of the cliffs around the Cliffs of Moher, we received a report approximately a year ago and we have been working with the stakeholders. Concerns were raised about safety in particular zones around the Cliffs of Moher and we have been working through our safety, quality and compliance section, the county council and the local stakeholders to deal with that. However, it is still deemed in appropriate for volunteers to go into parts of the cliffs.

As regards the steel girders, we have been working with the Office of Public Works to put in place a programme for servicing and inspecting the girders to allow people to train inside. Volunteers' competencies have not been reduced as a result of this. They are inspected annually through a log book where they are required to do eight exercises in cliff per annum, and that requirement remains in place still. The bolting system is specific to approximately six or seven teams around the coast. The limestone around the Cliffs of Moher and the Doolin area proves problematic in terms of driving stakes into the ground. We have been working with Doolin Coast Guard on bringing in a new system and using the Doolin team as an initial team for it. However, but part of the older system has now become obsolete.

The Coast Guard has never tethered to vehicles. Our system is to tether through stakes or a bolt system.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** It was authorised in Doolin for years.

**Chairman:** Mr. Ferns needs to conclude as many members wish to contribute. We may return to this issue.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Mr. Ferns's answers were very clear but the fact is the teams were authorised to tether to a vehicle. The vehicle was kitted out for that purpose. I conclude by thanking the witnesses. There is something wrong when volunteers are resigning from an organisation. The higher echelons are paid to manage it and, as I said earlier, the disconnect is very apparent. The committee must seek an independent inquiry, with the Rescue 116 case in mind and also to address what is happening organisationally with the Irish Coast Guard.

**Chairman:** We are at the start of a long session. We will take everything on board and consider it as a committee.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** I will try not to be repetitive. Much of what we want to elicit has already been addressed. I ask Ms O’Keeffe or Mr. Clonan to try to characterise for us the relationship between them, as the central edifice of the Coast Guard, and the volunteers. There are representative groupings and organisations. Will they speak for a minute to how they characterise that relationship and where it is at rather how it should be? There are issues in Doolin, which we know about them and are public. Are there issues elsewhere? What is their understanding, insofar as they have one, of the situation in Doolin and how it arrived at that position? Accusations will be made by all sides when such a critical juncture is reached. There are inter-personal and HR issues on the ground. A mechanism is, hopefully, now in place but there were previous attempts to address the problem. There is a negative view in the region that the Coast Guard did not move quickly enough to address these issues when they were raised and did not find an appropriate solution. Notwithstanding having put in some level of mediation, it does not seem to have been adequate and appropriate. The view is held strongly in the area that, while it was an indication that the process had failed, it should not have got to the standing down of the unit or taking it off board, and that the Department should have taken more appropriate action at an earlier stage for the obvious reason that the work that the volunteers on both sides of the divide here do is highly valued. The people on all sides are highly valued. The work that they do is highly valued. They are skilled. They are trained. They give of their time for their community. We need to understand the process that the Department deployed when these issues arose first, which is quite some time ago; why the process that the Department deployed was not robust enough to resolve the issue; and if Ms O’Keeffe has any thoughts or views on how the Department might improve were that issue to arise elsewhere.

I would like Ms O’Keeffe to be more clear, if she could, following on from my colleague’s questioning, as to why the decision to stand down the unit was taken. There is a recognition that 11 or 12 who are still there have skills and competencies - maybe not as extensive as what was there heretofore - that could still be deployed. Ms O’Keeffe might answer those and I will save my couple of minutes for an intervention afterwards.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** The Senator asked me to characterise the relationship or how the volunteer units work and are perceived at central level. I need to be clear about this. The volunteers are the backbone of the service that is delivered by the Irish Coast Guard around the Irish coast. These are 900 or so people who give up their time selflessly to serve people who may find themselves in difficulties, by and large, in the sea or on the coast.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** I thank Ms O’Keeffe. That is clear. What efforts are made on an ongoing basis to engage with or to have some level of polling of how the volunteers see the Department? We could all bring in volunteers we know who would take a different view as to how they feel they are treated. What active methodology has the Department to ensure that they feel satisfied, comfortable and happy? How does the Department measure that? I know where the Department is coming from, but how would they see it?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I will pass to Mr. Clonan in a moment because I know he is anxious to answer this particular question. Can I say that we are very concerned to make sure we engage fully with Coast Guards very often? In particular, can I just mention that as part of the programme of organisational change that the Coast Guard is currently engaged in, the Coast Guard was awarded an accreditation by the Great Places to Work organisation. Leading up to that, the Coast Guard undertook a survey of the volunteers as part of that. The survey reported really high levels of satisfaction, trust and confidence in the management of the organisation - higher than for many similar organisations.

If the Senator will allow, I will now pass to Mr. Clonan who has much more detail of the process that goes on there. Mr. Ferns may well have something to say at the end of that as well.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Senator Dooley will understand from the previous interaction that I will be quick and to the point. First of all, the volunteers, as the assistant secretary says, date back with the Coast Guard. We have a very close relationship with the volunteers on the coast. Each function has to be exercised. For search function, it is once per month. For cliff, boat and drone function, it is more irregular. We have coastal unit sector managers on the coast who visit the teams regularly to assess how they are getting on in training and to assess the need and how they are getting on internally within the unit - talking to the officer in command, OIC, about the education and training.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I am sorry, Mr. Clonan. We cannot hear you.

**Chairman:** Mr. Clonan, the reception is dreadful. Is there anything we can do to improve your reception? Your background is causing havoc with the picture. Whatever background you have is reflecting.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** It is not even that. The voice is gone as well.

**Chairman:** Yes.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Of course, they are all working from home.

**Chairman:** Mr. Clonan, you are on mute.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I am working from the office in Leeson Street.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Mr. Clonan would want to get the broadband looked at.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I will speak as slowly as possible.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** Could I suggest, Chairman, with your permission, that we might go to Mr. Ferns at this point and then try to go back to Mr. Clonan?

**Chairman:** No. We will suspend for a number of minutes to try to correct the quality.

*Sitting suspended at 10.26 a.m and resumed at 10.47 a.m.*

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Clonan and Mr. Ferns for making the effort to join us to discuss this very serious topic. They have done their bit for the green environment by cycling at record speed. I will allow some time and latitude to Senator Dooley to recap on the questions raised and we can re-engage then.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** I ask the guests to speak about what happened in Doolin. I am interested in understanding how we arrived at that position. I am not doing so to apportion blame but to try to understand if there are learnings from what happened so that it is not repeated elsewhere.

I want to understand the relationship and engagement between volunteers and the Irish Coast Guard. How does the Coast Guard manage to maintain an understanding of where these volunteers are at? How is that engagement worked out?

I also raise some wider issues on the size of the Irish Coast Guard versus a coast guard of a

similar jurisdiction, with a similar land mass, similar seas to be covered, a similar population, etc.? The witnesses spoke about numbers being around 83 permanent staff. That seems a small number to me, although I appreciate that other agencies are involved. Are we trying to operate on a shoestring? Should we invest more and have much greater engagement with volunteers? There are 900-odd volunteers, which is a large number. Are we investing enough or are we stretching ourselves too thinly? If so, does that lead to some of the issues that have arisen?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I thank Senator Dooley. The three questions were to provide a summary of the Doolin issue, outline the relationship with volunteers and how we maintain it and describe the state of the Irish Coast Guard, if I can put it that way.

On the question on Doolin, I will first say that we have 44 teams and, in general, every team is working fine. Our communications to the teams are managed by a coastal unit sector manager. I believe I was at this point when communications broke down earlier. The sector manager regularly visits the teams. We have an officers in charge, or OIC, conference once a year where all the OICs are brought together for a weekend. This is an in-house event where we get to know the volunteers. We also have sector meetings in the six sectors to see how things are going and we have a newsletter. We have various means of communicating with the teams.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** That is central. That is push information. What does Mr. Clonan do to get the read from the staff?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The sector meetings are push and pull because we are down on site with the teams. We bring six teams together, for example, in Cork. They come in for the day. We are with them all day. We have a series of things to say. They have a series of things to say. Generally, it is getting a briefing on how are things on the ground and how are things getting on. The same applies to the OIC conference.

The CUAG is an extremely important group that we have. I will explain how it operates. We are joined at the hip with it. There are nine members. They are voted in. There is a representative of the cliff team. There is a member representing the boat teams. There is a member representing the search team, the ordinary volunteer and the different grades. There are nine members. We meet them on a very regular basis.

For anything we are inputting into the Coast Guard, such as new equipment, personal protection equipment, PPE, training and incidents, we set up technical advisory groups. If we want to buy vehicles, for example, we set up a technical advisory group to advise us on that so that the procurement process involves them. It involves them for PPE. It involves them for anything that we are doing. It is not a customer relationship. They are us and we are them. When we are doing something, we do it with them, if you follow me.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Turning back to Doolin, Mr. Clonan might address where he sees this.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** That is an overview. We have a number of units around the coast and we will have industrial relations issues. We have the volunteer code. How we do our business, how they do our business and the relationship, and the disciplinary procedure, etc., is in there. We have a safety management system, and we have how to organise standard operating procedures, SOPs, etc.

With the relationship and the industrial relations issues, we have had four disciplinary procedures in place in the past five years for 900 people. Those resulted in no higher than a verbal

warning or a written warning. That is for 900 people. We had four dismissals - two this year and two last year. The code sets out what is a major infraction, for example, fraudulent activity and non-adherence to SOPs. The list is there.

Generally, we had 3% turnover in the volunteers in the past three years. In the energy industry, such as ESB, it is 10%. For retail, it is 60%.

Doolin is one of our flagship teams. It is a very busy team. They have four elements: search, cliff, boat and drone. If I was to say when things started to go wrong, I suppose it goes back to 2020. I am very wary of where I am and I do not want to make things worse. I do not want to name names, nor will I do that. It started there. It festered. One of our OICs left and we have another OIC there. That person is doing a great job. In May 2019, that person came to us and said that we were having problems there. What did we do? There is a sense that we did not do anything and that we were slow. We immediately engaged with them. I have detail here but I will not go into it. It sets out month by month for the last two years where we have engaged with it.

**Chairman:** Be careful not to say. You have an independent mediator appointed. Just be careful.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I am trying not to go there. We got a HR company in to assist us because we work with the volunteers but we are not specialist HR people. This required this type of thing. We brought another company in. We have been working with them with the team to try and mend the ways. Up until recently, we offered a mediator. We are where we are. Mr. Mulvey is in there now. HR issues are very sensitive.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I get it, yes.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I do not want to go into it.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I do not want to upset the apple cart in any way.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The team in Doolin up to very recently was very active. They were training, although the training was beginning to go down a bit because of the-----

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Issues?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Would Mr. Clonan put Doolin in the context of the overall situation? Are there any other units around the country that Mr. Clonan has concerns about at present that could lead to a similar situation?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** No. As to how I know this, my boss, Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe, was telling about it. We have the Marine Casualty Investigation Board, MCIB, report, the air accident investigation interim and preliminary reports, and now the final report. We have not been sitting on our hands. We have been working through that. There is a big reform programme going on there.

With my staff, with my people and with my stakeholders, I cannot just draw up a plan and say, “Okay, lads, this is what we are going to do.” That is not the way you do it. Basically, I did a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis of what we needed to do, what resources we have and where we are going. With the staff and with our own people, I partnered

with the great place to work programme. We are on our second survey at present. Everything is kind of a mess because I have come over on the bike.

**Chairman:** That is fine.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I am just looking for the heading. Basically, the questionnaire looks at three headings: trust, credibility and fairness with the management. They are asked specific questions on that, and also on pride and respect with their colleagues, and then there are open questions. That questionnaire went out. Compared to the industry standard, we do quite well to the extent that we were awarded a great place to work. That is nice. At the end of the day, it gives me, my managers and the volunteers a sense of where we are in the state of play and where they are in the different teams. Where there are IR issues in the teams, you can see where it is dropping down in those areas. They are the areas we are working with more strongly. It gives us a good indication of where we are going, that I am not driving it too fast or it is not going too slow, and it is working.

**Chairman:** Why is the Irish Coast Guard in the position it is today? From Mr. Clonan's side, as management, why has it got to this point?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Why has Doolin got to this?

**Chairman:** Doolin and maybe other issues. Why has it got to this point, generally, that we have the volunteers' association getting on to us with issues? Why has it got to that point?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** On the volunteer representative association, I have seen the people who are in it. I do not want to denigrate the volunteers' representative - that is not what I am here for. We work through the CUAG. They are the people we are joined at the hip with.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** What status does that group have?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** They represent the volunteers *en masse* on equipment, operations and training. Obviously, on HR issues, if there is a disciplinary process, we cannot allow people get into that in any great detail but if they have a concern about a particular issue, they can raise it. They are the representative association.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Are they the official representative body?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes. They are the official representative group for the Coast Guard volunteers. They have been doing that for the last-----

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** In all respects?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** In all respects. They are included in that code. We meet with them on a very regular basis. Does Mr. Ferns want to add anything?

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I suppose what I want to tease out quickly is that the independent group that has now set up-----

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** -----obviously does not feel that that forum provides them with the access that they need. From Mr. Clonan's dealings with them, are there many in that so-called breakaway group or independent group?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** All I can do is look at the evidence before me. They wrote a letter to the Minister stating they wanted to speak to the Minister but they stated it was pointless talking to me. I will listen to anybody because I am trying to run an organisation.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** How many do they represent, would Mr. Clonan say, of the 900?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I do not know. I do not want to name names. I know, because it is in the public domain, the chair-----

**Chairman:** I need Mr. Clonan to be careful. He has issues under way in terms of Mr. Mulvey being appointed. I am conscious of all the sensitivities.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** There is the chair, the secretary and the communications persons. I know one of the people is currently serving within the units, but everybody is free to associate. People can talk, but the representative association for the Coast Guard is the CUAG, which is very active.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Okay. I do not want to get into an inter-----

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** If someone comes to me in the street and says that he has a problem with this, that and the other, I will listen to him, see what the problem is and find out if there is any substance to whatever the issues are. When I am visiting the units, that is what I do. The ears are out, finding out how things are going. The audits are going on and from a competency point of view, the team is working. Even when they are responding to incidents, if the incidents are going too high and, as volunteers, they are responding infrequently, I need to look at that too. They are volunteers and the backbone of our organisation. I do not want people to burn out. We know the implementation of safety management systems and more processes has an administrative burden on a team. We are considering how to manage or deal with that. Volunteers join up to put on the gear, get into a boat, climb a cliff and take part in searches. That is why they join. It is quite onerous for Coast Guard teams to keep up the competencies they have.

**Chairman:** I have ten members seeking to contribute and we have to be out of here in an hour and a half. I ask members to be conscious of that. We lost time but it was important that Mr. Clonan and Mr. Ferns were present because the Internet connection was so poor.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** To follow on from the contribution of Senator Dooley and the theme relating to the coastal unit advisory group, CUAG, is it fair to say it is an advisory group?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** It is an advisory group but-----

**Deputy Joe Carey:** That is what it is called, is it not?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes, but advice-----

**Deputy Joe Carey:** It is an advisory group.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I would be very reluctant to overturn its advice.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** It is an advisory group.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** It is the coastal unit advisory group, yes.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** Would it be termed a representative group?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I consider it a representative group.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** If a volunteer has a grievance or a problem within his or her unit-----

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** May I answer that?

**Deputy Joe Carey:** Does this advisory group represent such people?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** To whom does a young volunteer who has joined and maybe does not like the way things are going on turn? He turns to his area officer. It may be that the area officer who is the source of difficulty. If so, he can turn to the coastal unit sector manager, but he does not think so. He can also contact the members of the coastal unit advisory group to say he has an issue. That is how it is done. I would hate to think there are people in such a situation. When I go around visiting teams - I know they are not employees - the message is about dignity and respect in the workplace.

**Chairman:** Who determines the make-up of the advisory group?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** It is in the agreement. I would have to open it. There are nine members but-----

**Deputy Joe Carey:** They advocate-----

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** -----they vote themselves-----

**Deputy Joe Carey:** Can they advocate on behalf of a volunteer? If a volunteer has a grievance within his or her unit, can the members of the advisory group advocate on behalf of that volunteer?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** They can if they wish to and if they ask. It is the same as being able to bring one's legal representative into the matter. Our disciplinary procedure is the same as-----

**Deputy Joe Carey:** Why is it called an advisory group in that case?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** That is the name we have inherited and that has been in place for 20 years-----

**Deputy Joe Carey:** It is not a representative group.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** It is. It represents the interests of the volunteers.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** In a grievance, it does not and cannot advocate on behalf of a volunteer.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I do not know if it has done so in the past.

**Mr. Niall Ferns:** It would be fair to say that for most representative associations, HR matters are not included hugely within the terms of reference. As Mr. Clonan stated, the terms of reference for CUAG date back several years. We did a major review in 2018 and made sure it was more inclusive of all the ranks within the organisation. I have lost my Internet communication. I was trying to access the terms of reference. Certainly its overarching role is to represent. The wording that is used is that it is representative of all functions, volunteers and geographic areas.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** If a volunteer has a grievance, the coastal unit advisory group can represent the volunteer in that grievance with management and try to work it through.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Absolutely.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** Have there been many cases where that has been the position?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** No.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** There are widespread bullying and harassment claims being made throughout the country. I have met volunteers past and present and there is a very low ebb. Morale is at rock bottom. Problems that emerged in Doolin have been allowed to fester unchecked for many years. That unit has been taken off the board. Mr. Clonan has to step up and recognise there is a problem and that what is there at the moment is not working. These people in these units in communities volunteer their lives on a 24-7 service and give of their time but they feel they are being stonewalled, not listened to by management, bullied and harassed. We now see the establishment of an independent representative organisation for volunteers. I think the Coast Guard should recognise it, engage with it and listen to it. I have met people from Waterford, Cork, Kerry, Clare and Galway who are involved in this and they all have the same message. They are really concerned about an organisation they love. They see it falling apart before their eyes. They are screaming for this to stop. All they want is proper engagement. I do not believe that is there. It is not delivered through an advisory group, which is what the Coast Guard has at the moment.

There are 12 volunteers in Doolin. They are highly committed people. They want that unit back on the board. They can do it. What is the precedent for stepping them down? Has the Coast Guard stepped down other units with 12 fully competent people who are able to deliver services on the ground? All the time they are off the board, they lose their skills and cannot train. They cannot keep their competency level up. That is the reaction of the Coast Guard. I absolutely welcome the appointment of an independent mediator. Everyone in this room has advocated for that to happen and I wish Kieran Mulvey well in that difficult task. What precedent has the Coast Guard used previously to step down a unit with 12 fully trained and competent people who want to do the job? What precedent was used to step down that unit? Will Mr. Clonan please answer?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** What precedents have we used? The Doolin unit has been having problems for several years. Six members resigned and there are 12 left. Based on what I have been told, my belief is that the interaction within the team is not safe. The 12 members we are talking about are not safe to go out because of the issues that have arisen as a result of the internal conflict that is there. That is where we are at. I will not have people going out to sea or climbing cliffs if I do not have confidence in them doing so safely. I am protecting myself and I am protecting them, but mainly them. We have had the loss of Caitríona Lucas. I do not want us to have such a loss ever again. That is where we are at. We have a situation in Doolin that, in my belief - and that is what I work off - is not a safe situation to allow to continue. That is why they were taken off the board. Until that assurance is got, that is the way it will be. I am not in the business of sending people out onto cliffs or in boats and putting them in harm's way.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** What assurance does Mr. Clonan need?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** When a group of people join, they go on a probationary period, do their training, get to the standard required and we see how they are then.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** But those people are-----

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** It is not a flick of a switch.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** They have 175 years of experience and Mr. Clonan does not believe they have the competency to do certain tasks. Whatever about launching a boat, they could be doing ambulance assist, which they do in the community. If the ambulance needs assistance, the Doolin Coast Guard is called to go out and help.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I was thinking of maritime response search and rescue.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** Could Mr. Clonan envisage a situation where he would allow that to happen?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** We are trying to work through the current issue with the mediator and-----

**Deputy Joe Carey:** That is an issue for the community. That is a service the crew would gladly provide but the Coast Guard is preventing them from doing it because it has stepped them down. It stepped them down from doing other tasks as well and prevented them from continuing to train.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** When the mediator has finished his business, we can take this up again. Going in and changing the balance at the moment is not what I can do.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Many questions already have been asked. We had statements in the Seanad today on Rescue 116. We got legal advice on that and a mediator has been appointed. Deputy Carey spoke about precedents. I thank the witnesses for their attendance. There is a major issue in respect of both sides but the overarching question I must ask, in the context of our Coast Guard and the relationship with the OPW in the provision of new facilities, is what would Ms O’Keeffe advocate for, were we to bring the OPW in.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I thank the Senator for the question. I take it we are talking about the Coast Guard building programme, is that right?

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Yes.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** Fine. The Department is responsible for the Coast Guard building programme, which essentially is aimed at ensuring that the Coast Guard units around the coast are fit for purpose. It is managed through the Office of Public Works from the planning and design to the build and ongoing maintenance stages with legal assistance as necessary from the Chief State Solicitor’s office. The programme is funded from the Department’s Vote. I am not sure what the question really is. Is there a particular question?

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** On the upgrading of facilities, what are we looking at in respect of the future of the Coast Guard service?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** Is the Senator asking me what projects are likely to come on stream?

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Yes. For example a new building was provided a couple of years ago in Crosshaven, County Cork. How can we improve the facilities for our volunteers and for those who work in the Coast Guard?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** Our aim is to make sure that the volunteers and those who work in the Coast Guard have the best possible facilities available to do their jobs safely. That is our basic objective and policy. There are some very old buildings in use by the Coast Guard, some of which we are trying to upgrade, maintain and improve. We have a building programme. The

focus at the moment is on Greystones and Westport. Both of those will start construction early in 2022. There are other projects around the coast. Some of the existing buildings are called rocket houses and, as I am sure the Senator is aware, they date back to the 19th century and do not provide the necessary accommodation to house 24-7 response units. Some new building projects are urgently required in those areas in terms of health and safety. In regard to any specific building project, Mr. Clonan might be better qualified to answer a question on a specific project.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** In the context of the coastal unit advisory group to which Deputy Carey referred, has Mr. Clonan given any consideration, and I am conscious that we have mediation, to something similar to what the GAA has in terms of a disputes resolution committee type of approach?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** To answer the question on the dispute resolution committee, no we do not have a dispute resolution committee.

**Chairman:** Have you given consideration to setting up a similar type of dispute resolution committee?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I was not aware of a dispute resolution committee. When writing our code, I consulted with the GAA on how to manage volunteers, but what we have is a complaints procedure and a disciplinary procedure. The first stage of that is local resolution, to see if we can form a resolution before it gets into a formal process.

**Chairman:** Just to go through it, if you have a volunteer at the moment with a genuine grievance, what is the process? What appears to have happened is there appears to be a lack of belief in the system at present. What is the current system? To whom would such people go?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** They would go to the officer in charge of their unit.

**Chairman:** Where would it go from there?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The officer in charge will deal with the issue or the complaint before it goes to a formal level, just like any other disciplinary or complaints procedure.

**Chairman:** Where does it go to then?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** If it cannot be dealt with, it is formalised, it is going to be written and it goes to the sector manager. The sector manager will talk to his or her operations and training manager in Dublin and then we deal with it.

**Chairman:** Is the sector manager a full-time employee?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes.

**Chairman:** Okay, so that is the first point at which it gets to a full-time employee?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes.

**Chairman:** Okay. I will hand back to Senator Buttimer.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I thank all involved for the huge work that is done and the volunteerism. The opening statements give testimony to the number of call-outs, the number of lives saved and we must be grateful and say thanks. Our job today is to ensure the mission state-

ment in terms of the safety of the maritime transport sector and the obligations and responses to look after and protect those who are charged with doing the call-outs. It is important, and the Chairman touched on it, that if there is an issue with staff and local management then there must be a process whereby you can go one up or one aside in terms of a dispute resolution. The important thing here is that we must ensure that the coastal unit advisory group is inclusive. I cannot stress enough that it be inclusive and that it engages properly. Kieran Mulvey will do a good job, as he has done in the past. I would not want to pre-empt his outcome but one of the things I am sure he will come back with is that aspect of engagement. It is all about the issue of grievances and complaints. Again, I thank everybody involved and our witnesses today. We all appreciate what is being done and what people in their care do every day. We are very grateful. It is our job to ensure they are funded and that the support structures are in place and collectively it is our duty to make sure that the equipment and training are up to speed and is proper. If we learn anything from Rescue 116, there must be accountability and transparency and there needs to be scrutiny and oversight. That is important.

**Chairman:** As I know Mr. Ferns was looking for it, we need to see the terms of reference of the Coast Guard's advisory group. Is there any way we can get that? Can he locate that before the end of the meeting? Does he have it?

**Mr. Niall Ferns:** I do, I just have to access it and I can send it to the meeting.

**Chairman:** Once you have accessed it, let us know. I assume the terms of reference are not lengthy?

**Mr. Niall Ferns:** No, they are only about four or five pages.

**Chairman:** That is the kernel of it. We need to get down to that.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I welcome Ms O'Keeffe, Mr. Clonan and all the other witnesses. This is my first opportunity to say this following the report on the crash of R116. I add my voice to the condolences for Dara Fitzpatrick, Mark Duffy, Paul Ormsby and Ciarán Smith. I would also add my voice to those condolences for Caitríona Lucas. That just shows the nature of the work the Coast Guard does and its importance. As for the report, there obviously needs to be follow-through on those recommendations. Beyond that, we need to look into those protocols and how we operate in regard to catching mistakes, particularly those mistakes that were mentioned earlier about the air navigation difficulties.

We are dealing with this situation. I do not want to repeat what has been said and even if we do not get into the rights and wrongs of it, if we are talking about Doolin it would be fair to surmise that we are here on the basis of what was at least a HR failure. We can talk about the rights and wrongs of the new organisation, the ICGVRA - it does not exactly roll off the tongue - and we can talk about CUAG and whether its terms of reference mean it is a representative organisation. It is fair to say, however, that a significant number of people have been in contact with all of us who do not believe it is at this point in time. There has been a systems failure and a communications failure and an inability to deal with these HR issues. Mr. Clonan stated himself there have been failures and difficulties over the years, even in Doolin. We all accept Kieran Mulvey has been appointed and that he has a difficult piece of work to do which he needs to work through, but what we need to get from that work are learnings on how we operate into the future. Some of the material that has been put into the public domain and in front of us concerns not only those HR issues and difficulties. Obviously, there is the material relating to R116. The question is whether we have the ability not only to have a fit-for-purpose system

to deal with the three areas of search and rescue, maritime casualty and pollution response, but beyond that, a system that is fit to check and catch mistakes as they happen.

Sometimes an analogy is made with the airline industry, which was bad for many years. The industry discovered the best approach was to create almost an amnesty for those who had been involved in near collisions or whatever so that they could come forward with the information, from which learnings could be made, protocols could be changed and the system could be made better. Sometimes we look for a head when it is already too late. We need a system that will catch mistakes, will give us the best bang for our buck, and one that is about saving lives. Will Mr. Clonan comment on that?

Mr. Clonan spoke about audits. I was going to ask if there is a need for an audit across the board to ensure we have a system that is fit for purpose and has the protocols in place for catching HR and safety issues. Mr. Clonan spoke about ongoing audits. Will he provide some more information on that?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** On audits, each team is audited for the four functions. The audits are operational audits. From the point of view of HR issues, I get a report on the number of grievances, complaints or disciplinary procedures. I have set out the details relating to the past five years. When I meet with the 44 volunteer team leaders as a group, I sit in a room with them and have tea or coffee. I am a very approachable person. If there is an issue, they will tell me. I have not heard of any such issues.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I accept that. I also do not want to get into a “he said, she said” situation. I accept that would be unfair. I am interested in the process and putting in place a better process in future that catches such issues. We are talking about volunteers who do serious work, combined with the management the witnesses have to do. We need something that works.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I agree. The coastal unit advisory group, CUAG, is the first port of call. It links into the volunteer community to determine if there are issues. From what has been reported in the media, it is clear there are issues. From my perspective, I need to get a sense of that. However, in the sampling, polling, questionnaires and engagement on whether it is a great place to work, it is not coming through. If there are issues, I want to know about them.

Going back to the Deputy’s point about the airline industry, search and rescue is maritime and aviation. I sit on the International Civil Aviation Organisation, ICAO, and International Maritime Organisation, IMO, joint working group on search and rescue, which includes safety. The whole thing about aviation safety is a just culture. We are implementing a just culture within the volunteers and our organisation. I should be able to go down and talk to a person. That person should be able to tell me about mistakes that have been made. For example, he or she should be able to tell me that when he or she put the trailer onto the hitch, it came off and hit something. I want to know about such incidents, not as part of a blame culture but to find out how we can fix it and ensure it does not happen again.

On continuous improvement, a report is produced on any of the incidents we attend, detailing what happened and lessons to be learned. In the past 19 months, with our new safety management system, we have implemented a deviation management process. When a possible deviation from the process is brought to our attention, we stop and investigate from the point of view of finding out what happened. It is not about a blame culture; it is about finding out what happened and making it good. I believe we have had 25 such deviation incidents in the

past three years. They are reducing in number as the just culture gets more established. That is how we manage it.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Would it be fair to say that at this time Mr. Clonan believes the system is improving in relation to catching mistakes and so on, but obviously there is an absolute necessity for two-way communication and trust, and these other issues do not help with that?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I want two-way communication and to build a just culture within the Coast Guard and among the volunteers. Any time I go round the teams, it is about ensuring there is dignity and respect at work, a safe place of work and a just culture. I am a friend to the volunteers, but I am also their manager, if the Deputy follows me. It is that relationship. I do not step over that. We have a professional relationship with the volunteers and there is respect and openness on both sides. We have our values. We got the volunteers and the full-time staff together and asked them what the values of the Coast Guard are. We have the Civil Service values. The values the staff voted for are respect for one another and pride in what we do.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** On the three areas the Coast Guard deals with, does Mr. Clonan believe at this time that we have the fit-for-purpose operation we need and require?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The volunteers, the full-time staff and I want a world-class search and rescue, maritime casualty and pollution response, which is our mission statement. We are not there yet, but we are very nearly there. We are building towards that. The members have the reports. We are implementing the recommendations.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** What about the issue of resources and so on, leaving aside the issue that it is hoped will be dealt with?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Absolutely. From 2017 to date, there has been a 20% increase in staff numbers. I am introducing a phased increase. I approached the management board in 2017 or 2018 and said that to implement the recommendations and do the work required, I needed to build the Coast Guard. However, if a lot of staff had joined the organisation at that point, it would have tipped it. There are three members of staff in the safety, quality and compliance section, comprising a safety officer, compliance officer and a person in charge. The operations section has been readjusted. The next section we are looking at and reviewing is the Coast Guard unit and support section, which is the section that supports the volunteers on the coast. The staff members there know that, because I have told them. They can see it.

**Chairman:** It is not fit for purpose at the moment.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Mr. Clonan said there is a review ongoing-----

**Chairman:** I know that, but-----

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** It is where we are.

**Chairman:** There are 900 volunteers.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes.

**Chairman:** Do the structures within the Irish Coast Guard to manage that level of volunteers meet the corporate governance requirements they should meet?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I approached the management board and I brought in a new structure, which includes new staff. That must say something about where we are at the moment and the need to improve the system.

**Chairman:** The system at the moment, however, is not where Mr. Clonan would like it to be.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** No. We are moving in the right direction. We are maturing as an organisation. We have come from where we started a few years ago with a certain number of staff. The organisation is growing. We have stood up the safety, quality and compliance section and the operations section. There is more work to be done in engineering. Safety, quality and compliance is the area we are working on at the moment to bring in additional staff and structures. What we are talking about-----

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** In fairness, what exactly does the organisation need to be fit for purpose across all the sectors? I get that Mr. Clonan is saying the organisation is moving in the right direction, but what is that final destination?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** A business case is being submitted to the management board and it has been approved.

**Chairman:** For how many staff?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** It is for 12 staff.

**Chairman:** Are they going to be full-time staff?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** They will be full-time staff. We are not finished; it is a journey.

**Chairman:** How many staff were in that section?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Currently, there are six on the coast, four in the Leeson Lane offices, and there is a division within the Department, namely, the maritime safety policy division. It currently supports the-----

**Chairman:** How many staff are there?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** There are seven.

**Chairman:** That is 17 staff in total. You are virtually doubling the staff.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes.

**Chairman:** For me, looking at that from the outside, there is a problem. There are not enough resources in that area. We welcome the fact it is being done, but we are getting to the heart of the matter now.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We are heading in the right direction, but we are not there. That will bring the staff up to 29. That is virtually doubling the staff. What will they be doing?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** It is in the business case. I am not being short; I ask the Chairman to bear with me, please. Let us take cliff vans. We have to have a policy on cliff vans and how to manage them. That includes strategic management, acquisition, training, and maintenance. It is quite a big area. At the moment I have one clerical officer and Mr. Ferns managing that as

well as a fleet management company. The policy will address that and stand up that area.

**Chairman:** The Coast Guard is under the Department. Has it made any submissions to the Department for additional funding that is still outstanding?

**Mr. Niall Ferns:** It is the business case.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes I have and it is approved.

**Chairman:** It is fully approved.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes, it is coming.

**Chairman:** When was it approved?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I think it was September of this year because myself and Mr. Ferns were working on it.

**Chairman:** When will the 12 staff be in place?

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Has the process started for recruitment?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** No, the management board has approved it and it has gone to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for approval.

**Chairman:** Therefore it has not been approved by the Government yet. It has been approved by the Department but not by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** That is where we are at.

**Chairman:** We will be writing as a committee to ensure that this funding is expedited.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Managing 900 volunteers is not an easy business.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** No, it is significant work and in fairness I think that is where we are going on this.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Absolutely, and what I am doing is building that expertise.

**Chairman:** We want a frank exchange of views. What Mr. Clonan is doing is giving us that. We want to assist. We are here to represent everyone. The volunteers do phenomenal work. That is why we are where we are with this hearing today. However, the Coast Guard has made a submission that is waiting approval from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. We want to get that expedited. We will write to the Departments of Transport and Public Expenditure and Reform to expedite it. That is it. It is very straightforward.

I will allow Deputy Ó Murchú conclude.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** No, I appreciate that. We will try to facilitate the new staff as much as we can because it is necessary so that the Coast Guard can be fit for purpose. We spoke about volunteers and the term used was “dilution of service”. There was a question of whether that related to a lack of training, insurance or whatever. With the additional staff mean that some of those issues will be dealt with? I was worried when I heard that volunteer staff cannot do specific safety work. Who does?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** We need to be strong out of HR. We employ a HR company to assist us in the HR area. We engage with fleet management to help us with our extensive fleet.

**Chairman:** I understand that the 12 staff who are being brought in are to allow the Coast Guard to develop the service it is providing with the volunteers across a range of areas.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** That is it.

**Chairman:** That makes it safer and more streamlined. Among those 12 staff, has consideration been given to appointing one specific person in management whose exclusive role is to liaise with the 900 volunteers?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Not specifically but if the Chairman will let me finish, I will outline what I have asked the management board. I am a sailor. I have qualifications in management, corporate governance and HR, so I understand the issues that need to be addressed here. What I am doing, with the management board, is to bring in some outside assistance with me and my team to look at specific matters. I did not detail what the 12 staff are doing. Generally, we put down the numbers we think we will need. That is how I have been building on a phased basis. I do not want to use the dreaded word “consultant”, but I need someone to come in with the team to advise on the structures. I am not a logistics or HR person. I need people to come in and look at the structures -----

**Chairman:** We are here today because volunteers up and down the country have concerns. They need to be addressed. Mr. Kieran Mulvey has come in on the Doolin issue. There is an opportunity with increasing resources to look at the overall evolution.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** That is what we are doing.

**Chairman:** I will move on.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I appreciate that. As the Chairman said, we are here because these HR issues have been raised with us. If the Coast Guard needs more staff to run the organisation and it needs outside knowledge or a consultant to ensure there is best practice in communication and dealing with the grievances, then that is vital. I welcome what the witnesses said about the safety audits and the operational issues. There needs to be an audit of the protocols for communication and to deal with the HR issues. If we can resolve that it will benefit everyone and bring us closer to a fit-for-purpose organisation that does the vital work.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I have a good relationship with my management board, so that there is no misunderstanding. What I am asking for has been given.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I appreciate the witnesses taking time to come in and deal with these serious issues. My first question is to Ms O’Keeffe. I understand she is soon to depart from service in the Department of Transport. I hope that she does not feel as though she has been thrown under the bus today. Can she confirm that the Department does not have internal expertise in the area of aviation? I understand it advertised for an aviation expert. The closing date was December last year and the Department has still not appointed an aviation expert.

I refer to the maps used by CHC. I understand the maps were scanned to feed into the navigation system and the scanning left the maps a couple of inches short, which left Blackrock Island out of the system. Who is responsible for oversight there? Does Ms O’Keeffe accept that the IAA has no statutory obligations with respect to the SAR group and that is part of the

forthcoming Air Navigation and Transport Bill 2020?

I believe the families should be encouraged to take legal advice as to which jurisdiction they will go to to resolve the loss of their loved ones. Families have been left without an income as a result of what happened. All agencies involved, including the Department of Transport, the Irish Coast Guard and the IAA need to reflect -----

**Chairman:** No attribution of blame because that is -----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I am not laying any blame whatever.

I turn to the Coast Guard representatives. I have a damning list of what has been going on in the service. In 2014, there was an accident at Inch. The Marine Casualty Investigation Board, MCIB, report was not produced. With regard to the Kilkee tragedy, people in Kilkee tell me they were warning that there was a likelihood of a fatality because Coast Guard management would not listen to them. Regarding the crash of Rescue 116, the personal locator beacons apparently did not work when the crew went into the water. That was in 2017.

I return to Ms O’Keeffe for a moment. I am trying to understand why the Exchequer paid a private company €7.5 million to retrofit the cockpits of their helicopters and buy night-vision goggles that are still in the possession of the Coast Guard? Why is that training is not completed today almost eight years later?

Returning to the Coast Guard, in 2020, there was a judgement against Ireland because the MCIB did not conform with the independence requirement. I refer to scrutiny again. There was a failure of oversight. Captain Steve Clinch wrote a review. That report has not been published. The Comptroller and Auditor General produced two reports that were absolutely damning. Mr. Clonan said that his trainees come in as probationers and are trained to a standard. How is that standard certified? Who certifies it? What agency certifies it?

With respect to the allegations of bullying and harassment, Mr. Clonan stated that the organisation has the Coast Guard code. He said the Coast Guard has engaged with the GAA on the drafting of that code with respect to volunteers. Did the Coast Guard engage with the volunteers? Did it bring volunteers together and run that code by them?

As for dispute resolution, where there is a dispute, full-time members of the Coast Guard have access to legal services. Do volunteers have access to legal services, and does Mr. Clonan know if they can avail of the Workplace Relations Commission when it comes to a dispute?

Going back to my colleague’s questions about the CUAG, the CUAG is not a representative group. I come from a trade union background. If you want a representative group, that representative group has to be something like the ICGVRA, which has now come together and which will be recognised by a trade union or employee representative body. Whether Mr. Clonan likes it or not, sooner or later the Coast Guard will have to engage with that group. I understand that Mr. Clonan has always been willing to engage with volunteers. My question to him is who is stopping him from engaging with that group. If it approaches him as a representative group, will he, as the acting director of the Coast Guard, engage and negotiate with it and try to resolve the issues that exist?

Going back to Ms O’Keeffe, why is Mr. Clonan still acting director? Why has he not been appointed to a permanent post in the organisation?

I deeply respect the work the Coast Guard does but it needs to engage with volunteers. One clear example of it not doing so is outlined in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on the purchase of vehicles. It is clear from that report that there was no engagement with volunteers, and that is simply not good enough. Volunteers, as Mr. Clonan well knows, have to feel they are part of the family and feel they have a voice. I believe that a lot of what we are looking at today is as a result of a lack of a voice. It should be remembered - and I ask Mr. Clonan to pass this on to his people - that bullying and harassment are offences against the person, and at some stage somebody will take an action against his organisation. He is only one man. He is here in the hot seat today and I feel somewhat for him, but he has answered the questions put to him well and defended his organisation. I would like him to get out on the ground and fix the problems that are there. I believe he is committed to doing that and I would like him to do it urgently. If there is something impeding that, from his point of view, he should come back to the committee and we will work on it.

**Chairman:** Mr. Clonan's and Ms O'Keeffe's respective roles are private and not to be discussed here, but will they deal with the specific issues Senator Craughwell has raised? The nub of what the Senator asks is, in respect of the establishment of a representative body, whether it has been possible to locate the terms. Has it been possible to print and circulate them? If the Coast Guard has a representative group that comes together, why will it not recognise that representative group? I refer to the ICGVRA.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The Coast Guard has a representative group. It is the CUAG. It is more than a representative group because it is engaged in advising us and working with us on operations, equipment-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Who appointed its members?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The group appoints its members. I do not appoint them. They represent each of the functions-----

**Chairman:** Are they appointed by the volunteers?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Yes.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Therein lies the problem. If there are two separate groups within the organisation trying to establish two separate representative groups, Mr. Clonan has a serious problem.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** There is one group that has been within the organisation for the past 20 years and, as I said, it is more than a representative association. Representative associations and unions do not deal with management, operations, purchase of equipment and so on, but this representative group does. We are joined at the hip, as I said earlier. I think the issues we have here are grievances-----

**Chairman:** If the two bodies are joined at the hip, Mr. Clonan, maybe that is the problem.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** These are people voted by the volunteers to represent them in all aspects, from equipment, PPE, the way they do their business, the stuff we buy for-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** The Comptroller and Auditor General has stated that the Coast Guard did not engage with volunteers.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** On that particular issue, back in 2014.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** If that is one example, though, and if we examine more cases, we will find more examples. It is clear that transport was purchased that was totally unsatisfactory and-----

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** At the beginning of the year we sit down with CUAG and go through the plans for the purchases and the services we are delivering. The opportunity there is that we buy this or that and do this or that and CUAG is fully engaged in the process. It-----

**Chairman:** Mr. Clonan, with due respect, I have read the Comptroller and Auditor General's report, as have other members.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** That was unfortunate-----

**Chairman:** Once a purchase was below €500,000, it did not have to go out to tender. It could be done through the Coast Guard. The contract was for €160,000. That sum miraculously ended up becoming €1.4 million. When the contract was put out for public tender, it had an estimated value of €160,000. Therefore, a business case was not required to go to the Department, yet the value increased to €1.4 million. Was that ever approved by the Department?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The Comptroller and Auditor General's report is accurate and factual. It says the Department did not get value for money or anything near it.

**Chairman:** With due respect, Mr. Clonan, how did that happen? How did the Coast Guard put out a tender for a project worth €160,000 which did not require any business case to go to the Department and which suddenly ballooned into a €1.4 million contract that never got Department approval? How in the name of God did that happen in the Irish Coast Guard? We talk about corporate changes and so on. I was on the Committee of Public Accounts. This is as damning a report as I have seen. The question is this: how did it happen?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The procedures were not followed.

**Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe:** May I come in at this point, Chairperson? Would that be helpful?

**Chairman:** If you would like to do so, yes, Ms O'Keeffe.

**Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe:** The report the Comptroller and Auditor General did recently on those vehicles is, as Mr. Clonan has said, fairly damning. It relates to something that happened in 2014. We are holding up our hands to the recommendations of the report and we cannot really say there is anything wrong with them. We accept and will implement them. Prior to the publication of the report, the Department had been in the process of strengthening its corporate governance in the area of procurement. This involved a line-----

**Chairman:** Ms O'Keeffe, I am sorry. We have only one question here: how did this happen? It is all very well saying the Department is changing its systems. We have a fiduciary duty as public representatives to get value for money for the public purse. Two things happened here. A contract for €160,000 was put out to tender so no business case had to be made to the Department. Then the value of the tender ballooned nearly tenfold to €1.4 million and it still did not get approval from the Department. Not only that, but the trucks that were bought were grossly inadequate, so the contract fails on every account. I have read the report. I still have not got an answer from anyone as to how this happened. Mr. Clonan, it was on your watch. You were deputy chief of the Coast Guard at the time. How did this happen?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** That is what we want to find out.

**Chairman:** You do not know even at this point, four or five years later.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** We have the report. The Comptroller and Auditor General's report was in 2020. It was brought to our attention by our deviation management system in early 2020.

**Chairman:** When was the first time the Irish Coast Guard knew about this discrepancy of about-----

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The first time I knew about it was when the deviation management happened in early 2020.

**Chairman:** You are saying to me-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Somebody in the Coast Guard spoke about this. You go to tender for €100,000-odd and suddenly the value of the contract starts to balloon. Surely somebody had to sit down and say, "Lads, we did not include this and did not include that and we need to do this and do that." Mr. Clonan was at management level at that time. Surely to God management sat down and discussed this €1.4 million purchase?

**Chairman:** Has any disciplinary action been taken against anyone in the Irish Coast Guard on foot of this stark and appalling revelation?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** No.

**Chairman:** Why not?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** As I said, I do not want to make any-----

**Chairman:** For instance, are the people who were involved in the procurement and doing the work within the Irish Coast Guard still working in it?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Back in 2014? I could not be 100% but I think so. There may be one or two gone. I am not sure.

**Chairman:** With due respect, this is grotesque, unprecedented, bizarre, unbelievable, GUBU, territory. This is-----

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** We were very unhappy and I am very unhappy with it. The Comptroller and Auditor General laid it out starkly. Now we are going back-----

**Chairman:** With due respect Mr. Clonan, your corporate governance and your financial systems were sleeping. The Coast Guard did not know about this until the Comptroller and Auditor General brought it to its attention. That meant this had gone through. The Department was not aware of it. Ms O'Keeffe, were you aware of it in the Department?

**Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe:** I was not aware of it, no, at that stage. What I can say-----

**Chairman:** Would you have been the-----

**Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe:** -----if it is any help is that we are taking this extremely seriously in the Department-----

**Chairman:** No, that is not what I am asking.

**Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe:** -----and the real-----

**Chairman:** I am asking about the fiduciary and the corporate. Was Ms O’Keeffe the assistant secretary over this section at that moment in time?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** No, I was not. Just to note, because of some of the questions the Chairman is now asking, we are embarking on another review of the issues raised in the special report and on other related issues.

**Chairman:** With due respect to Ms O’Keeffe-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** If I may, Chairman, why did I refer the purchase of vehicles to the Comptroller and Auditor General? I did so because people within the service were aware of what had happened and came to me with their complaint. This is all part of a system that is just broken. As I could not get answers, I went to the Comptroller and Auditor General and asked him to have a look at this. I was absolutely shocked by what came back. This is out of two reports so far from the Comptroller and Auditor General, and I have asked for other ones.

**Chairman:** There is a need for a formal disciplinary proceeding. You all need to do it. The question is how did that happen. Mr. Clonan does not have that answered yet. To Ms O’Keeffe, I note that answer needs to be arrived at quickly by the Department on behalf of taxpayers. They are paying your salaries. They are paying our wages. We are having this meeting because of the volunteers up and down the country. We accept the work the Coast Guard does and we will support it with extra resources. Ironically, the Coast Guard wasted the bones of €1.4 million of taxpayers’ money on something top management clearly were not aware of. Mr. Clonan was not aware of it.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** No.

**Chairman:** Therefore it happened at a layer below. I would have thought that at this stage, between Mr. Clonan and the Department, some form of disciplinary action needs to take place here, to forensically find out how this happened. It is not good enough for them to come in to us and say they will take on board what the Comptroller and Auditor General is saying. I brought this up today and in fairness, Senator Craughwell initiated this whole process. This is damning for the Irish Coast Guard and even the procedures within the Department for overseeing what the Irish Coast Guard is doing. What allocation of funding does it get from Ms O’Keeffe’s Department every year?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** Can I just come back on the question of the special report? We are taking the special report extremely seriously. We cannot answer some of the questions the committee has today on the special report. We are not able to do it and those questions are clearly questions the committee is asking and that we need to be able to answer.

**Chairman:** Ms O’Keeffe that is not good enough. I am sorry. You are doing a job there. This is not personal.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** No, but if I could just say-----

**Chairman:** It is not good enough.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** This is being taken very seriously at the highest levels within the Department. We are carrying out another review on the issues raised in the special report with a view to answering some of the unanswered questions.

**Chairman:** I have a final question for Mr. Clonan. The vehicles that were purchased, I

think there were 17 or 18, where are they at the moment?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** They are on the coast-----

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I will hand that to Mr. Clonan to answer-----

**Chairman:** Mr. Clonan, where are they at the moment?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** -----but I emphasise we are taking this very seriously and we are carrying out a further review on that report with a view to answering some of those questions.

**Chairman:** We will be following up on that.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Can I answer?

**Chairman:** Yes. Where are those 17 vehicles?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The procurement process does not stand up to muster.

**Chairman:** Yes.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** That is the first thing. We have bought 18 vehicles. The 18 vehicles are for the cliff teams to carry their equipment. They also provide facilities for-----

**Chairman:** Are they in operation?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** They are, yes. All of them

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** They are unsuitable though.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** No, they are not.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Not according to the Comptroller and Auditor General’s report.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Can I finish, because it is very important and is something that has not got out there, if you know what I mean? Cliff teams operate up narrow lanes and no one vehicle will do the job for them. Otherwise it is a truck and the truck will not go up the lanes. What I need is a mix of vehicles, such as 4x4s, quads and the vans. It was never-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Did the Coast Guard buy them fully-equipped or did it buy empty vehicles?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The contract was to buy the vehicles and get them fitted out. It was one contract to get all that done and they were fitted out. The thing with the volunteers is - and this is the reason they should have been brought it in at the beginning - that the intention was not to carry all the equipment on the van. You could not get it all into the van because of the volume. The van was bought to replace the existing van and to keep a mix a vehicles. When you are going the side of the mountain to go up to a cliff face - the Senator knows Doolin and the Cliffs of Moher - a truck does not do it. You need 4x4s, quads and a van to carry the excess equipment, and trailers.

**Chairman:** Mr. Clonan will appreciate we are going to come back to this. Furthermore, because the contract was only €160,000, obviously it was not seen as in any way a beneficial contract. Thus, only two contractors went in and by God, it was Christmastime. They suddenly

had a contract that went from €160,000 up to €1.4 million. Consequently, we have to come back to it.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Can I get an answer from of the Department on the statutory responsibility of the IAA with respect to search and rescue?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I will pass that to Mr. O’Flaherty.

**Chairman:** That is fine.

**Mr. Phil O’Flaherty:** The IAA is statutorily responsible for issuing air operator certificates and search and rescue approvals. There is one such approval currently for the operator that is currently contracted. That covers aviation safety regulation and oversight, as well as oversight of the operational responsibility of the co-ordination centres-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I apologise to Mr. O’Flaherty but I want him to deal specifically with the position prior to the R116 accident. Was the IAA statutorily obliged to oversee the search and rescue operation? It is a “Yes” or a “No” question.

**Mr. Phil O’Flaherty:** Yes, because the-----

**Chairman:** Be careful here now Senator Craughwell.

**Mr. Phil O’Flaherty:** -----role of issuing-----

**Chairman:** You are steering very-----

**Mr. Phil O’Flaherty:** -----air observation certificates and-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** No, I am not trying to apportion blame here.

**Mr. Phil O’Flaherty:** -----search and rescue approvals were assigned to the IAA. As the Senator is aware, some of this is copper-fastened in the Air Navigation and Transport Bill now, which provides further clarity. Indeed, some of the arrangements were put in place under the national SAR plan, in terms of the regulators’ forum, which ensures there is greater co-ordination and clarity of roles.

**Chairman:** You need to conclude.

**Mr. Phil O’Flaherty:** The answer is “Yes”. The authority acted in that way, it inspected, it received safety cases and it exercised oversight in respect-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** That is simply not true.

**Mr. Phil O’Flaherty:** -----of safety management. However, the-----

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. O’Flaherty.

**Mr. Phil O’Flaherty:** -----statutory position around this is strengthened in the Air Navigation-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I know I came through there.

**Mr. Phil O’Flaherty:** -----and Transport Bill.

**Chairman:** Mr. O'Flaherty, that is-----

**Mr. Phil O'Flaherty:** It ensures that when they make regulations that apply to the Coast Guard that they consult the Coast Guard and consider the public benefit of-----

**Chairman:** Mr. O'Flaherty needs to conclude.

**Mr. Phil O'Flaherty:** -----adding exemptions to the standard rules of the air-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** We can clear this up by saying that current Bill, namely, the air navigation Bill, will fix this problem.

**Chairman:** Okay.

**Mr. Phil O'Flaherty:** -----because as the Senator is aware, the standard commercial air transport permissions-----

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. O'Flaherty.

**Mr. Phil O'Flaherty:** -----and rules of the air would not be sanctioned to effectively carry out search and rescue operations in the sorts of conditions that they operate in.

**Chairman:** We will have to turn it off. He cannot keep going.

**Mr. Phil O'Flaherty:** The Department has already been consulted on them. There are further draft regulations-----

**Chairman:** Mr. O'Flaherty will have to conclude.

**Mr. Phil O'Flaherty:** -----of search and rescue. That includes the clarity that the IAA has developed and submitted to the Department for consultation also.

**Chairman:** Can Mr. O'Flaherty hear us? We will now move to Senator Horkan.

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** There has been an awful lot of coverage on this already, some of which I have watched and there are obviously some particular issues. Doolin has been referred to by many members from Clare, including Deputy Cathal Crowe, Senator Dooley and Deputy Carey. When I look at the whole situation, a lot of the issues have been touched on. Is there any organisation in the State such as this whereby there are only 82 full-time staff to 900 volunteers? It seems to be a ratio that I am not aware of anywhere else. Many of us are in political parties where volunteers are volunteers. They do an amazing job but it is a voluntary role. They are presumably working in other jobs. Perhaps some of them are retired or whatever. Is it an organisation that can continue to have such a ratio of only 82 full-time people versus 900 volunteers? Is it fit for purpose going into the 21st century, with all the issues it is facing? I note the organisation has a pollution response service, which I did not know about. It responds to maritime casualties and has a search and rescue service. It seems to be getting involved in on-land search and rescue as well as coastal activities. Is this the best way forward?

**Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe:** The ratio of full-time staff to volunteers is something we keep under review on an ongoing basis. In the previous discussion about this and about the future resourcing of the Coast Guard, it is also worth mentioning that there have been increases in full-time staffing of the Coast Guard in recent years in response to changing demands in the system that need to be met by the Coast Guard. Some years ago, the organisation was a lot smaller. The need for additional resources was identified and those were provided. In the same way, the need

for additional resources has now been identified again. We had a discussion on the resources already so I will not go through it again. Is the organisation fit for purpose? We keep it under review all the time to ensure it can discharge the functions it needs to discharge.

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** I thank Ms O’Keeffe for that reply and for her opening statement. I acknowledge that 391 lives were saved in 2020. It can never be forgotten that this service is there. Is it more difficult to get volunteers? We spoke earlier about a churn of people coming and going and so on. I am not sure whether that was in relation to full-time staff or volunteers. Does Ms O’Keeffe have an indication of whether these are volunteers with ten, 20, 40 or 50 years of service? Are they staying a long time or is there a big churn of people? As and when the economy picks up, it will presumably be harder again to get volunteers involved.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** No, the opposite is in fact the case. I will pass to Mr. Clonan or Mr. Ferns in a moment to give more detail. The units actively recruit the volunteers. They have experienced no difficulties in getting people from their communities who are willing and, indeed, are very keen to enrol in the Coast Guard, and then enter the training programme to become full members of the volunteer cohort. Despite the challenges of the past two years with Covid, units have continued to enrol new members and advance team training throughout that period. We are frequently privileged to give long-service medals to members of the volunteer corps who have served for considerable periods in the Coast Guard. I wish to take a moment to acknowledge that service, to acknowledge the people who continue to come forward and to acknowledge the people who have continued to serve for very long periods in the Coast Guard. I will pass to Mr. Clonan or Mr. Ferns who will provide figures on that.

**Mr. Niall Ferns:** We looked at the figures when preparing for today. In the past three years, in actual fact 121 volunteers have moved on. There is always a passing-through of volunteers. People join and they go on probation and they last for a year. People join and spend maybe five, ten or 20 years in the organisation. Following on from Ms O’Keeffe’s piece, we had an extensive roll-out of medals and we presented some 50-year medals which, for somebody to have given that much of his or her time, is fairly impressive. There has been a net increase of 79 volunteers in recent times. While 121 have moved on, 200 have joined. Having looked at the numbers, we do not have an issue recruiting volunteers into the units as there has actually been a net increase of 79.

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** To be fair to the witnesses, and to the Chairman, we should acknowledge the role of all these volunteers throughout the country who are doing an amazing job saving lives, rescuing people, be they on cliffs or in maritime situations and so on. In terms of the fit between all the different bodies, there is the volunteer sector, the RNLI, the Coast Guard helicopters and the community inshore services, and the Coast Guard now has a role against pollution. Obviously, the Coast Guard is doing work. The RNLI is doing similar work. The Coast Guard calls on the RNLI and I presume the RNLI calls on the Coast Guard or its helicopters. Is that the best fit? Is there duplication in what the RNLI is doing? I am not taking away from anybody’s activity. Would it be better if they were all part of one organisation, not that I am trying to get rid of one or the other? Is there an element of duplication going on between the RNLI, the Coast Guard, community inshore services and so on?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** There is no duplication. What is in fact happening is that the rescue services are co-ordinated by the Irish Coast Guard. I will again pass to either Mr. Clonan or Mr. Ferns to give more detail on how that is done.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** To take up from Ms O’Keeffe’s comments: there is no duplication.

I look upon it as a three-legged stool. The centre is the rescue co-ordination centre and, of the three legs, one is the RNLI, one is the Coast Guard helicopter service and one is the Coast Guard unit volunteers. Search and rescue is bigger than that. It is about shipping. Most of our rescues involve inshore swimmers. There is the recreation industry, fishing and what we call solo ships. When a distress call goes out, it is incumbent upon the vessels to assist. When something happens, all those other resources come in, in addition to the assistance from the Navy and the Air Corps. That is how it is done.

In relation to other countries, the UK has the RNLI and Her Majesty's Coastguard service, which comprises of volunteers. It is the same in Maritime New Zealand.

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** In Ms O'Keeffe's opening statement, going back to the procurement issue, she said:

The Coast Guard is a significant buyer of products and services. For this reason, a review ... [was] under way for some time. This review has identified some shortcomings ... and actions have been taken, particularly in the areas of ... to address these. There are also a number of legacy issues which we have been tackling and will continue to tackle over the coming months.

How long is this going on? It seems this whole issue has been going on for years. Ms O'Keeffe said "Our aim is to ensure that all procurements are conducted in accordance with" but that does not mean that is happening. She is saying that her aim is that it will happen. When will the organisation be at best practice level in terms of procurement?

**Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe:** There was an internal audit report carried out in the Department into this very issue.

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** What year was that? When was that?

**Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe:** I will pass to Mr. Clonan in a moment to give some details on it. As a consequence of that report, a number of changes were made. We have focused in recent years on applying more staff resources and more training, and in adjusting our procedures to ensure we perform to the best of our ability. In case I gave the impression, this is not a future tense issue. We have been doing this for some time. These procedures, training and new systems are already in place. All procurements are at present going through all these.

When I refer to the future, I say that this should continue into the future. If further strengthening needs to be done in the future, we will do it. There are a number of legacy issues that we are dealing with and will continue to deal with. These new procedures, structures, training and staffing have been in place for some time. I will pass to Mr. Clonan in case he has anything to add.

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** Ms O'Keeffe said that larger procurement is best practice. She stated the aim is to ensure monitoring, compliance, awareness and educational frameworks are being improved as the Department seeks to ensure the smallest procurements are treated with the same rigour, thoroughness and attention to detail as larger procurements. This suggests the big stuff has been dealt with but the smaller stuff has yet to be dealt with.

**Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe:** I apologise. That was not my intention in making the comment.

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** It is just how it reads.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** My apologies if it was unclear. What I am saying is that we have some big procurements and some small procurements in the Coast Guard. Our intention is that all of these would receive the same care and attention in the context of what we try to do in the Coast Guard and in the context of EU regulations and the very stringent procurement law that we have to comply with.

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** I am very conscious of time. I thank all of the people who came here today, in particular the volunteers. I thank everyone for their opening statements and the contributions that have been made. Let us hope all of these legacy issues can be dealt with and tackled and that we have a system that is fit for purpose and does everything it should do the way it should do it and the sooner the better.

**Chairman:** I thank Senator Horkan for his patience and his time.

**Deputy Darren O’Rourke:** I thank the witnesses. I will follow up on some of the issues on procurement. Is there a threshold above or below which projects have to be tendered? I know there was a figure in a report of the Comptroller and Auditor General. Is there a figure now? Is it, for example, above €50,000?

**Chairman:** It is €500,000.

**Deputy Darren O’Rourke:** Has that changed?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** We had an audit in 2019. The audit made recommendations and they have been implemented. Deviation management picked up the issue with the cliff vans, which we passed on to the Comptroller and Auditor General. With regard to the internal audit unit report, we updated our procurement manual to address these issues and the issues raised in the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General. The thresholds and engagement with volunteers are all set out.

**Deputy Darren O’Rourke:** Has the amount of €500,000 changed?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I would have to go in and look at the thresholds. There are thresholds from zero all the way along.

**Deputy Darren O’Rourke:** Okay.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Everybody in the Coast Guard went through a period of training when we went through the procurement manual. That is ongoing.

**Deputy Darren O’Rourke:** I will move on to a separate but related issue. It was reported in the media that in mid-March the cliff rescue services were temporarily suspended. Why was this? Was it because of equipment? Did an assessment take place? What were the findings on this? Have the services come back on board?

**Mr. Niall Ferns:** Back in March we did an assessment of the entire cliff folio. This covered all aspects and not just the technical system. The TAG 07 system is the one we operate. We have been using it since about 2010. When we did the risk assessment we identified various pieces with which I was not happy. We needed to manage the risk of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. It is a risky operation and everything needs to be in place. When we looked at it what I said essentially was that procedures, verification on audits and working with suppliers of equipment needed to be looked at. I met the officers in charge of all 17 cliffs units. I told them where we were at and what we needed to do. It involved a series of measures rather

than just one measure. We did a risk assessment throughout the organisation and we picked the measures to take after which everything else would be acceptable. We worked very hard to get the service back on board. It happened on approximately 12 March. Our ultimate aim was that through external verification and an operational readiness audit of all of the climbing teams they would be back on the board. They were pretty much back on the board by approximately June.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** There was a risk assessment and it was acted on. Is the Coast Guard still using the TAG 07 system?

**Mr. Niall Ferns:** Yes.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** There was a question about using one provider and then moving to another that had experience not in search and rescue but in wind energy.

**Mr. Niall Ferns:** That is the contract. We outsource the training and certification of our volunteers. We do this for several of the functions. It was a three-year contract. It was up for renewal anyway. We went to tender on it. It was won by a particular company that has been providing our training certification since June. We use it for the provision of some technical advice also.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I will come back to the substantive issue with a question for Mr. Clonan. I am struggling to square this to be honest. I have submitted parliamentary questions on this. I hear what the Coast Guard and the Department are saying in terms of it being a great place to work with a relatively low number of disciplinary actions and dismissals. There is a significant programme of change and involvement with the coastal unit advisory group, CUAG, and there have been various meetings. I have worked in various organisations and I have a level of training. Political parties have volunteers. I have never seen or experienced with any organisation what I am hearing about the Coast Guard throughout the country. Not just in Doolin but around the country there is a very different picture. What I am hearing from the witnesses and the management team is that they are not seeing it. This, in and of itself, is a red flag to me. It should also be a red flag to Mr. Clonan and the management team.

I represent a political party. There is a broad political spectrum on the committee. Every one of us is hearing the same thing and it is the worst picture although not in terms of the language used. It reflects a terrible environment for volunteers and workers across the board. They speak about widespread bullying, a dilution of services and people being afraid to speak out for fear of recrimination. They are literally seeking medical support for mental ill-health. This is deeply concerning.

This cannot be explained away with a process of change. From the perspective of this committee, we cannot ignore it. We cannot explain it away. It has not been explained in what we have heard. Does Mr. Clonan hear this? Does it concern him? Does he have a plan? Some of what I hear is that there is a disconnect and a failure to engage. Whatever Mr. Clonan may say about the processes and the level of engagement it is not enough. There is a failing within it. Does Mr Clonan hear from the representative group that has been established and other quarters in the way we have? We can share this information with him in a particular way. People tell us they do not want to be associated with the comments because of a fear of recrimination. It is very important that Mr. Clonan and the management team hear it and respond to it. What does Mr. Clonan have to say on this?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** One thing I am very concerned about is the fear of recrimination. I

am trying to build a just culture. Anybody in the Coast Guard unit who has a fear to speak out is not in the Coast Guard I want to be part of and they should not be part of it either.

**Chairman:** Does Mr. Clonan recognise what Deputy O'Rourke has said?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I do. The Chair has asked whether I recognise it. I hear it, but I cannot see it and I want to see it. Of course, I believe what Deputy O'Rourke is telling me. Internally within the organisation, going through all the structures we have, I am not getting those noises. I am getting it from the outside, but it is not specific. I need to hear the specific nature of it to understand. I have spoken to the people that are on the VRA and I know them. I know the majority of volunteers. I do not know why the VRA has been set up. Most of the volunteers are retired, but there are still issues there that they are holding and that need to be resolved. I am very concerned. We want openness and to reassure volunteers that it is open, that there are no recriminations.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** The next body of work that we need to do is to try to create a forum where we can knit this together. What we are hearing is deeply concerning. Part of it is the recognition of the new group and engagement with it. These issues are deeply concerning, and they are unhealthy. We should grasp the opportunity if there is a willingness to address them.

**Chairman:** As a committee, we are here today because the volunteers have come to us. It is too pervasive for us not to recognise it. A lot of issues have arisen today and the committee takes them seriously. We try to be inclusive as a committee. We want to hear from the volunteers as well. We make up our minds in a very independent fashion. Mr. Clonan must accept that issues have arisen and that, as public representatives elected by the people, we must take them on board. It is a body of work that we will continue with. We will be coming back on the issue in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report. Mr. Ferns is to send us the terms of reference of the advisory group.

**Mr. Niall Ferns:** Yes.

**Chairman:** We will be following up with the representative group as well. We want to feed into the process in order that the Irish Coast Guard is very much fit for purpose. It involves 900 volunteers, and it is vital that the system functions in an efficient way because it saves lives. It is something that we will take into consideration as a committee. We will follow up with the volunteers and we will come back to both the Coast Guard and the Department and other groups in terms of our deliberations on the matter, which we very much take on board.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** Deputy Shanahan has agreed that I can speak before him, but I will be brief. Further to the previous speaker, I am afraid I have heard the same things, both from constituents in Clare, which I represent, but also from current and former members of the Coast Guard across Ireland, not limited to Clare, more than 100 miles from Clare, with regard to the fear of recrimination and fear of speaking out and a certain disconnect. The witnesses might not perceive the disconnect, but I have been told of a disconnect between volunteers on the ground and management, which they feel has no understanding of where they are coming from or what they do. That must be addressed.

There were HR difficulties in Clare which have been very well ventilated for some time. A HR firm was sent to deal with them. If I am correct, Mr. Clonan was a naval officer. If there was a dispute between crew members on a naval boat, am I right in saying that a command-

ing officer would ultimately deal with the issue? It would not be a case of letting it fester and, having gone back to base, engaging a HR firm and sending someone to talk to those involved.

The Coast Guard is a volunteer unit. I question the management structure but perhaps it is by necessity. We have a naval officer and a civil servant. I am pleased they are here. I do not wish to personalise it. There seems to be very little input from the volunteers on the ground that are relied on to put their lives at risk. In looking at the structure, objectively, I see that there is a disconnect. We have volunteers and almost the officer class – the civil servant and the naval officer – and there is very little connection between the two. Perhaps that is something that is not within the remit of the witnesses. They are doing the job they were appointed to do, but it is something that we need to look at. How do we make sure that the volunteers on the ground are represented in management? In the Garda, one can join, go to Templemore and go right up to the top. Likewise, with the navy, one goes in as a commissioned officer and can go right to the top. In the Coast Guard there is a feeling that volunteers are just there to put their lives on the line, but they are never going to be in senior management positions.

**Chairman:** A new business case is needed to allow for the direct involvement of the volunteers in the overall direction of the Irish Coast Guard. I spoke to Mr. Clonan about a liaison with the volunteers. That is something that must be considered intensively. Consultants are being brought in. The committee will deliberate on today's proceedings and make its own recommendations. We will have to engage directly with the volunteers as well.

Does Deputy McNamara have a specific question?

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** Mr. Clonan has already responded to Deputy O'Rourke about the disconnect. Does he accept that the structure of the Coast Guard needs to change to make sure that the volunteers, or former volunteers, have a greater role in management so that there is not such a huge disconnect? I do not want to use a disparaging First World War analogy.

**Chairman:** Can Mr. Clonan comment on that?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** If I look at a similar organisation in a similar country, Maritime New Zealand, which has similar volunteers, there is a rescue co-ordination centre and I do not think there are any volunteers in it or in the management structure. I am not discounting it. Reference was made to the word "disconnect". I do not think we have a disconnect with the CUAG, but obviously something is going on. On whether volunteers can be part of the full-time structure, at the moment we are not structured to allow a volunteer to be a member of staff.

**Chairman:** The key feature here is that volunteers believe that if they bring up a grievance or something that is not aligned with management's views, there are recriminations. That is the substance of what we are getting. That is something we want the witnesses to take on board. We will continue with our deliberations.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** Would the Coast Guard consider the idea of putting somebody in place that would take a confidential report from a volunteer? I suggest a confidential recipient, somebody independent of the Coast Guard, perhaps a senior counsel or retired judge to deliberate on the issues outside of the organisation.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** We considered that option. When a person goes through a disciplinary procedure, he or she goes through an appeals process, which again is internal. If an employee is not satisfied with the appeals process, he or she has other ways of appealing through the labour court, for example, but volunteers do not have that route. I have looked at that with

my HR hat on. The question is whether the HR company can provide that route in an independent, confidential way. I did not talk to all the volunteers about this, but the view is that it was not a sufficiently independent process. I agree with what has been said.

**Chairman:** That is something perhaps we as a committee will flesh out and raise with Mr. Clonan.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I thank the witnesses. I want to direct my questions purely to the Department, if I may please. I want to acknowledge the sacrifice of the crews of Rescue 116 and Rescue 111, which crashed in 1999, as I did in the Dáil last night. Again, I express my sympathies to their families and the family of Caitríona Lucas.

The responsibility for the leadership of the air-sea rescue service rests with Ms O’Keeffe. She will be well aware of the recent citations of bravery given by the Ceann Comhairle to the crew of Rescue 117 for the saving of seven lives off the Haulbowline in March earlier this year. That could not have been achieved without the expertise of that crew. There is also the fact that we have a heavy lift helicopter in Waterford. Ms O’Keeffe will understand the need to have those services and having the resources based in Waterford. Ms O’Keeffe will also be aware that within the Department of Transport a commitment was given by the last Minister to provide €350,000 per annum in stopgap funding while an application is being made by Waterford local authority through An Bord Pleanála for the extension of the runway. The Department has now rescinded giving this €350,000 this year. At the same time the Department has also announced that €126 million in regional funding will be allocated to all other regional airports in the country. Can I ask for a quick response on this, because I have three safety questions to which I would also like a response? Can Ms O’Keeffe explain to me the rationale of her Department to reduce money to the sum of €350,000 that support the Rescue 117 service in Waterford? The Department donated €126 million in capital supports and other funding to all the other airports in the region. Meanwhile, we understand that a tender is also now in question around the country for the new application tender for the national air-sea rescue service.

**Chairman:** I ask the Deputy to be careful. There is a procurement process under way and we should not stray into it.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I will not and that is as far as I am going.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I thank the Deputy for the question. Unfortunately, I am not in a position to answer it because I am not sufficiently familiar with the funding of the regional airports. However, I will undertake to get somebody to come back to the Deputy on that. I apologise that I am not in a position to answer that.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I would appreciate that. I would point out that we have a valuable service in the south-east region. An airport is under threat simply because of the lack of funding. It is breathtaking. As I said last night, the figure of €350,000 that is needed to support our services in Waterford has been rescinded, while the figure of €126 million has been allocated to the rest of regional aviation centres across the country.

I have three other questions. I will pose all three questions together. The first question is on the application of night-vision goggles which have been supplied, fitted and trained to the Sligo rescue helicopter. I understand it is happening in Shannon. It has not happened in Waterford yet. When is this going to be completed? These night-vision goggles are only approved for helicopter emergency medical service, HEMS, activity. They are not approved for search and

rescue activity. Would Ms O’Keeffe please tell us why that is the case? How is that going to be overturned? These are needed for night-time flying activities.

Second, what framework documents has the Department put in place similar to the UK Civil Aviation Authority’s CAP 999, which basically provides a governance and framework for the operation of helicopter activity? Has the Department of Transport done this? Has the Irish Aviation Authority done it? If they have not done it, why not? When are they doing it?

The third question is on what came up in the report. Does the Department now acknowledge a need for a nationally-based, fixed-wing aircraft, either in Shannon or Dublin, to provide all of the activities that are needed for top flight cover, for patient transfer and for pollution monitoring? I understand that at present we are paying significant money for a Medevac plane in Ireland which is stationed for patient transfers. We could potentially be using that within a new tender. The money can certainly be found. Does Ms O’Keeffe accept that there should be no discussion about having a helicopter doing top flight cover when it can only be on scene for half an hour, when an airplane could provide up to seven or eight hours of top flight cover? Is the Department looking at this?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I thank the Deputy for the questions. Again, I am not in a position to give detail on these. However, there are people in the room who would be able to answer them. I will pass the question on night vision to Mr. Clonan. He might talk about fixed-wing aircraft at the same time. Then, Mr. Flaherty might deal with the Flight 999 question, if he can. We might go to Mr. Clonan first.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Concerning night-vision goggles, regrettably the timelines have been longer than we anticipated. We spent €4.3 million in modifying the aircraft in 2013. We spent approximately €500,000 in 2015 on the 24 sets of night-vision goggles. The training will cost €4.1 million. We have paid out €1.7 million so far. We started training. We awarded the contract for training in late 2018. The training started soon after that whereby training instructors travelled to simulators in Norway. That came to a halt during Covid-19 the following year. The training is progressing slowly because we want to keep the service running when planning training. Doing night training can interfere with the service because it takes helicopters off the board. Training takes place in winter. While it can be done in summer, the opportunity will not be there to do so. One gets most of the training done in winter.

On the night vision, this is the first time the regulator in Ireland has approved night vision for a commercial operator. We have got to the stage where for commercial air transport Sligo was approved. They are continuing to train the other bases. At the moment, we are at the stage where we want the regulator to approve night-vision imaging systems, NVIS, for search and rescue. It is pioneering within Ireland to do this. The structures are not there. The IAA is putting structures in place.

To give the Deputy an indication, the manuals have to be approved, the training has to be approved, the aircraft had to be approved, and there will be on-site inspections. It is not a case that they can turn up to do their driving licence and come away again. At the moment, I have been ensured by CHC Helicopter and the IAA that the approval for search and rescue NVIS is almost there. That is as far as I am at the moment with it.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I ask the Chair that in the follow-up discussions Mr. Clonan would come back to this point. It is an extremely important point for air-sea rescue. It started in 2018. I accept that there are difficulties around training. I accept that there are difficulties

with Covid-19. However, in light of the Rescue 116 report and what we now know, we cannot afford to be delaying this any longer. Surely, all efforts should be made to get this done in the next number of months. I accept the training issues and operational issues, but this can be done if the will is there. I think the problem is that the will needs to be demonstrated.

**Chairman:** Mr. Clonan might wish to communicate directly with the Department about the Coast Guard. If he wishes to communicate with the committee by following up, he can do that either.

We have to adjourn here at 12.40 p.m. I propose that Deputy Carey poses a quick question.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I want to ask Ms O’Keeffe about the Marine Casualty Investigation Board, MCIB. She will have been following the committee’s work on this matter. A review was initiated and carried out by Captain Steve Clinch. It was submitted to Ms O’Keeffe’s Department in July. Where stands that report? What are the Department’s intentions regarding publishing it and implementing its recommendations?

Does Ms O’Keeffe have a comment on the piece of work that was done by the barrister, Ms Roisin Lacey, back in 2010? Ms O’Keeffe might have a copy of that draft heads of legislation. It looked at the fundamentally flawed constitution of the Marine Casualty Investigation Board. We, as a State, ended up in the Court of Justice of the European Union about it for three or four years. We eventually had to take officials off that board. Ms O’Keeffe will be fully familiar with that. Could she update us on Captain Steve Clinch’s report? When will it be published? Can she give us a roadmap of when the recommendations will be implemented?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I have to be a little careful here because there are legal issues involved. As members are aware, the Bill, which went through pre-legislative scrutiny in this committee some time ago, is scheduled to commence in the Dáil next week. As part of the pre-legislative scrutiny, the Minister offered to commission an independent review of maritime accident investigative structures in Ireland. The report has been received by the Department. It is currently subject to legal advice. Members will appreciate that I cannot comment any further at this stage.

**Chairman:** Does Ms O’Keeffe have a timeframe?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I am afraid I cannot say anything further at this stage.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** Could Ms O’Keeffe speak about the Lacey report of 2010? Is Ms O’Keeffe familiar with that report?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** Yes, of course.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** Ms Roisin Lacey is a barrister. She drafted heads of legislation.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** Yes, I have read the report. I am familiar with it.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** Did she recommend an independent MCIB with fully competent people working within?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** That was some time ago. All of this research and all of these reports will be taken into account in taking the next steps with regard to the MCIB.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I ask that the Department publish the Lacey report in full. Could Ms

O’Keeffe arrange that?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I will have to check that out and get back to the Deputy.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** Will Ms O’Keeffe come back to the committee on that?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** Absolutely.

**Chairman:** Deputy Shanahan asked two quick questions but has yet to get a reply. Will Ms O’Keeffe address those questions?

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** To reiterate, I asked about the development of a policy document similar to the UK Civil Aviation Authority’s CAP 999 document. Does the Department or the IAA have something in place? The CAP 999 document is on governance and standard operating procedures for helicopter search and rescue services. I also asked Ms O’Keeffe to set out her personal opinion on the use of a fixed-wing aircraft for search and rescue services.

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** I will pass the first of those questions to Mr. O’Flaherty.

**Mr. Phil O’Flaherty:** In my earlier contribution, I mentioned that the IAA has drafted rules around helicopter operations in the context of search and rescue and a set of regulations to enable them. It has sent these to the Department for consultation. It is expected that these rules will be made and information distributed in the not-too-distant future, probably after the passage of the Air Navigation and Transport Bill 2020.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** Will Ms O’Keeffe address the question on the fixed-wing aircraft?

**Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe:** Mr. Clonan is best placed to answer that question.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** We are engaging in an aviation procurement process. If the Deputy goes to the Department’s website, he will see the higher-level specifications for the aircraft we are seeking on the market. These include fixed-wing aircraft.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** Mr. Clonan will obviously acknowledge that the use of fixed-wing aircraft is a far better solution for top cover than asking two rescue helicopters to coordinate.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** Absolutely.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms O’Keeffe, Mr. Clonan, Mr. Keogh, Mr. O’Flaherty and Mr. Ferns for attending and engaging with the committee. These committee meetings are being held on foot of volunteers making direct contact with us. We should not forget the phenomenal work they do. The five most recent tragic deaths, those of Caitríona Lucas and the crew of R116, Dara Fitzpatrick, Mark Duffy, Paul Ormsby and Ciarán Smith, remind us that real people’s lives and families are involved. We are all working on the same team. It is not personal. We have a body of work to do. We will now follow up with the volunteers and other groups. We will be making our own recommendations. We will follow up with the Department on the extra staff it has looked for. There must be a volunteer dimension to any business case. It must not only be something that works, but something that works through a partnership model. The fact is that there are 17 Irish Coast Guard units at the moment and 900 volunteers. By definition, volunteers must be central to the operation. Many of the volunteers who are coming to us do not feel that is the case. That needs to be rectified. We, as a committee, are willing to work with the

Department and the volunteers in that regard.

We wish Kieran Mulvey well in his role but Mr. Clonan would have to admit that the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on the 17 trucks is scandalous. You can phrase it however you want, but this is €1.4 million of taxpayers' money spent without going through the proper public procurement processes. It never left the walls of the Irish Coast Guard. It never went to the Department. It would never have been picked up on had it not been flagged to the Comptroller and Auditor General.

There is a lot of work to be done with the Irish Coast Guard. I believe the witnesses have acknowledged that. We will have further deliberations, follow up and make our own recommendations. I thank the witnesses for today and for making the quick trip across on the bike. Even in light of Covid, meeting in person makes a great difference. We all want to reach the same ends but we need a frank exchange of views.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.45 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Wednesday, 24 November 2021.