

OPENING STATEMENT – Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Cathaoirleach, committee members,

As Independent Chair of the Implementation Oversight Group for the Commission on the Defence Forces, I would like to thank you for inviting me back to address the Committee today. It is a welcome opportunity to share the progress that has been made since my last appearance before this Committee in May 2023, and I very much look forward to hearing the contributions of Committee members today. I am joined today by Implementation Oversight Group members Assistant Secretary Eamonn Murtagh from the Strategic Change & Capability Development division in the Department of Defence, and Assistant Secretary Brian Molloy, Defence Forces Head of Transformation. I am also joined by Principal Officer David Byrne from the Department of Defence, who is the Implementation Oversight Group Secretariat.

I have held the position of Independent Chair of the Implementation Oversight Group (IOG) since November 2022, and in total the group has met eight times, with the next meeting due to take place in early November. The IOG, meets regularly and reviews progress on the implementation of the Detailed Implementation Plan for the Commission on the Defence Forces, which was published in November 2023.

As you will be aware, the independent review group on dignity and equality issues in the Defence Forces published its report on 28 March 2023. The Tánaiste established an External Oversight Body of the Defence Forces, in line with one of the 13 recommendations in the report. The establishment of this External Oversight Body was a critical element for driving the necessary cultural change throughout the Defence Forces and increasing transparency and accountability. While my appearance here today is in my capacity as the Independent Chair of the Implementation Oversight Group for the Commission on the Defence Forces, I am also a member of this External Oversight Body.

Background

Before going into further detail regarding progress to-date, I would like to take the opportunity to provide context to the role of the Implementation Oversight Group and the work to date relating to the Commission on the Defence Forces. The establishment of a Commission on the Defence Forces was a commitment in the Programme for Government.

In December 2020, the Government authorised the establishment of the Commission and agreed its terms of reference and membership. The terms of reference covered the structures and size of the Defence Forces, defence capabilities, HR policies and strategies, the Reserve Defence Force, governance and high level command and control in the Defence Forces and pay structures. The work of the Commission was carried out against the backdrop of the Defence Policy Framework set out in the White Paper 2015 and the White Paper Update 2019, both of which were developed by joint Civil and Military teams.

Following 13 months of intensive work carried out by the Commission members, the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces was published in February 2022. The report contained 130 recommendations in total, and recommended widespread and unprecedented changes for the Defence Forces and Defence provision in Ireland. The Commission emphasised the urgent need for cultural transformation within the Defence Forces.

In response to the report, a Memo for Government and a High Level Action Plan including a response to all 130 recommendations were brought to Government and approved on the 12th of July 2022. The Government approved a move over a six-year period to a level of Defence Forces' capability equivalent to 'Level of Ambition 2' (LOA2), as set out in the capability framework devised by the Commission. This will entail funding increases to reach a defence budget of c. €1.5 billion (at January 2022 prices) by 2028 to be agreed through the annual Estimates process. This represents the largest funding increase for Defence in the history of the State.

The High Level Action Plan

The High Level Action Plan (or HLAP) which I have just referred to, grouped all 130 of the Commission's recommendations under 5 strategic objectives:

1. Strategic HR and cultural change to be delivered;
2. New Command and Control and joint structures to be established;
3. Services to be reformed and restructured;
4. Reserve Defence Force to be Revitalised, and
5. Joint Capability Development to be implemented.

The High Level Action Plan set out Implementation and Oversight structures including

- a High Level Steering Board chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach,
- an Implementation Oversight Group with an Independent Chair; and
- a civil-military Implementation Management Office.

The membership of the High Level Steering Board includes Secretaries General from:

- Department of the Taoiseach (Chair)
- Department of Defence
- Department of Justice
- Department of Environment, Climate and Communications
- Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform
- Department of Foreign Affairs
- and the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces

In addition to holding the position of Independent Chair of the Implementation Oversight Group, I also sit on the High Level Steering Board.

The purpose of the High Level Steering Board is to oversee the implementation of the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces as approved by Government. In addition to supporting and guiding the implementation, the Board also acts as a clearing house for issues

that cannot be resolved or where particular blockages are being experienced in the implementation of the Commission's recommendations.

The purpose of the Implementation Oversight Group is to oversee and drive progress in relation to the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission. The membership of the Implementation Oversight Group includes senior representatives from:

- Department of the Taoiseach
- Department of Justice
- Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform
- Department of Foreign Affairs
- The National Cyber Security Centre

It also includes myself as the independent chair, two Department of Defence Assistant Secretaries, two Defence Forces Deputy Chiefs of Staff and includes the Defence Forces Head of Transformation.

I am happy that these oversight groups are working successfully and providing real and tangible value to the overall Transformation Programme.

Detailed Implementation Plan

The five strategic objectives I mentioned earlier formed the basis of the Detailed Implementation Plan.

Intensive work was carried out on this plan in 2023, and the IOG received progress updates on the development of the plan throughout the process. It also had an opportunity to provide feedback and guidance. The process involved in developing the plan was thorough and methodical, and as the Tánaiste stated at the time, while it was important for this plan to be completed expeditiously, it was more important that we got it right. I am confident, as the Independent Chair of the IOG, that we did get it right.

The Detailed Implementation Plan, which was published in November 2023, sets out how the Commission's recommendations are to be delivered up to 2028. The scale of the proposed transformation effort is unprecedented. Strong progress has been made to-date regarding the

implementation of the Detailed Implementation Plan and there is much work to do in the months and years ahead. While acknowledging the scale of the task that lies ahead, I would also like to take this opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved to date and particularly since my last appearance here.

Of the Commission's 130 recommendations, 105 were accepted by Government as set out in the Detailed Implementation Plan, with a further 25 requiring further evaluation or to be Reverted to Government at a later stage.

To date, 33 of the accepted 105 recommendations have been fully completed. This is just under a third of the accepted Commission recommendations in total. A further 13 recommendations are on track to be completed by the end of 2024, with work currently underway across 100 of the 105 recommendations in total. The remaining 5 recommendations were not scheduled to commence prior to 2025. This is a significant achievement with still over 4 years of the overall transformation programme remaining to the end of 2028.

In parallel, 5 of the 25 recommendations for Further Evaluation and Revert to Government recommendations have now been completed and are now also accepted by Government for implementation.

The key achievements to date under each of the five strategic objectives include:

1. Strategic HR and cultural change to be delivered;
 - Pay has improved as a result of increases arising from the Public Service Pay Commission report, from recent pay agreements, and the early implementation of some of the recommendations of the Commission on the Defence Forces.
 - All personnel of Private 3 Star/Able Seaman rank are now paid the full rate of Military Service Allowance applicable to the rank, and, the requirement for that cohort to 'mark time' for the first three years at that rank has been removed.

- Existing Sea-going allowances have been replaced with less complex sea-going duty measures.
- The Defence Amendment Act 2024 allows the Minister for Defence to grant permanent ICTU associate membership, subject to the restrictions set out in the Act
- Healthcare afforded to officer ranks has been extended to enlisted ranks.
- Consultation with the communities of underrepresented groups to discuss the attractions on barriers to service in the Defence Forces has been conducted.
- Women in the Defence Forces are now supplied with and have ready access without delay or special request, to fit for purpose clothing and equipment designed for females.
- Gender, Diversity and Unconscious Bias training is now mandatory across all ranks of the Defence Forces.
- A mechanism has been created to ensure that there is female participation and input at all meetings at General Staff Level.
- Fitness standards have been reviewed and updated to ensure they are relative to accepted standards for females and modern military roles.
- The Defence Forces Womens network has now been extended to include female members of the Reserve.
- A female mentoring programme to allow women in the Defence Forces to benefit from the experience of identified role models and mentors has now been established.
- Priority courses for remote and distance learning solutions have been delivered.
- An administrative solution to enable the ombudsman for the Defence Forces to investigate complaints received more than 12 months after the alleged action or the date the complainant became aware of the alleged action has now been established.
- Greater transparency of the wider benefits of membership of the Defence Forces is now in place.
- Fitness & appearance standards have been reviewed and updated.
- Recruitment and induction strategies have been developed encompassing advertising, expanded recruitment and induction capacity.
- The maximum retirement age has increased to 62 for all ranks and the age limit for recruitment increased to 39.
- The Gender Advisor (GENAD) role was advertised internally and on public jobs.ie, and the successful candidate has been appointed.

- The Digital Transformation Officer (DTO) role was advertised internally and on public jobs.ie, and the successful candidate has been appointed.

2. New Command and Control and joint structures to be established;

- In June 2023 The Head of Transformation for the Defence Forces was appointed.
- In September 2023 the Head of Strategic HR for the Defence Forces was appointed.
- Strategic HR and Transformation Leadership teams, led by the externally recruited Head of Transformation and Head of Strategic HR have been established.
- The Defence Forces Vision Statement has been completed and approved by the Tánaiste.
- The Commission on the Defence Forces made a number of recommendations around Command and Control including the creation of a new position of Chief of Defence (CHoD). The Tánaiste received Government approval in July this year to prepare the necessary legislation to provide for the reform of high-level Command and Control of the Defence Forces.

The work undertaken is significant, complex and sensitive involving a fundamental review of the current regulatory framework governing the relationship between the Minister for Defence, the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence. These reforms are part of the modernisation of the Defence Forces and bring the high level structures in line with international comparators.

3. Services to be reformed and restructured;

- The reduction of a number of specific Aid to the Civil Power commitments has commenced.
- Smart Metrics for patrol days have been developed and agreed between the Naval Service and the Sea Fisheries Protection Agency.
- The army force design process has been initiated.

4. Reserve Defence Force to be Revitalised

- The Joint Office of Reserve Affairs is operational and annual reporting mechanisms have been put in place. The revised recruitment process for the Reserve Defence Force is ongoing and the age limit for recruitment to the Reserve has increased to 39. The maximum retirement age has increased to 62.
- A new Reserve Defence Force Vision has been published in May of this year.
- A Reserve Defence Force Regeneration plan has been published in July of this year.

5. Joint Capability Development to be implemented

- The Capability Development Team, a civil-military team under the Department of Defence, has been established and is operational. Significant progress has been made across a number of large equipment procurements.
- Two Inshore Patrol Vessels for the Naval service were delivered in May 2023, and have subsequently been commissioned (LÉ Aoibhinn and LÉ Gobnait).
- Two new c295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft were delivered in 2023 with a third due for delivery in mid-2025.
- In line with timelines set out in the Detailed Implementation Plan, progress is being made on the projects for each of the specific capability enhancements across all Services set out in the CoDF report including:
 - - a. Military Radar;
 - b. Anti-Drone/Unmanned Aerial System;
 - c. Armoured Fleet Replacement;
 - d. Naval Fleet Management & Replacement;
 - e. Enhancement of Air Corps Fleet;
 - f. Subsea awareness capability

As I mentioned earlier, to-date 33 of the Commission's recommendations have been fully implemented. With 13 more recommendations on track to be completed we will have a total of 46 fully completed by the end of the year. Significant progress has been made across many more recommendations.

The development of an update to the Detailed Implementation Plan is currently underway, and is scheduled for publication in November. The Implementation Oversight Group will continue to engage with the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces throughout this process.

As a group we have monitored the progress of the implementation of the Detailed Implementation Plan, and we are satisfied with the progress to date. This progress has laid strong foundations for the future work to deliver on this critical agenda.

At the time of my last appearance in front of this Committee, I mentioned that following the publication of the Report of the Independent Review Group on Dignity and Equality issues in the Defence Forces in March 2023, the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence set out his priority to develop one Strategic Framework for the transformation of the Defence Forces.

The Strategic Framework, which was published in September 2023, brings together into one overarching document, the immediate actions to be taken to support the transformation of the Defence Forces. The priority within this transformation is cultural change above all else. The end goal of this cultural change is to ensure that the Defence Forces is an equal opportunities employer, reflective of contemporary Irish society and is providing a safe workplace,

- where self-worth is actively promoted;
- where mutual respect becomes a dominant feature;
- where all members are treated with dignity;
- in an organisation that continuously evolves to deliver positive change.

This Strategic Framework covers the period from September 2023 to December 2024. A new updated Strategic Framework for 2025 is currently being developed and will be published in the coming months.

The Defence Budget provision has increased year on year throughout this transformation programme. The funding allocated in Budget 2025 has increased by €100 million (8%) and will enable the Defence Forces to deliver effectively on all its key domestic and international responsibilities, enhance our national and international security capability, and facilitate progression on the structural and cultural transformation of the Defence Forces as recommended by the Commission.

Since the publication of the CODF Report, there has been a huge increase in the Defence capital spending allocation, as evidenced by the highest capital spending allocation to date in Defence – to €215 million - a figure which will increase to €220 million in 2026.

This increased budget provision has resulted in very real tangible impacts, including the delivery of the two new c295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft and the two IPV vessels I mentioned earlier and significant upgrades of infrastructure across multiple Defence Forces locations around the country, including Collins Barracks, McKee Barracks and Haulbowline.

As you will appreciate, a huge amount has been achieved since my last visit here. This Transformation programme is well underway and the significant progress to date has given me the confidence that we have the momentum required to ensure delivery of the objectives set out in the Detailed Implementation Plan.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues on both the IOG and the High Level Steering board for their invaluable contribution to the process so far. I would also like to acknowledge the importance of the work carried out by the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence.

Finally, Cathaoirleach, I would like to thank you for inviting me here today and I look forward to hearing Members' thoughts and views on matters relating to the Commission on the Defence Forces.