

DEFENCE FORCES FIRMLY IN THE FIRING LINE

Numbers in Ireland's Defence Forces have fallen to around 9,000 – their lowest in decades. The drop in numbers has evolved over a number of years, in a climate where concerns over poor pay, working conditions and the increasing attractiveness of the private sector have taken their toll. Report by Deirdre O'Flynn.

According to PDFORRA, the association representing soldiers, sailors and aircrew of the Permanent Defence Forces, the crisis in recruitment is a major and worrying challenge.

"The numbers applying for the Defence Forces have decreased by over 50 per cent in the last five years, and are likely to further decrease in a rising economy," PDFORRA General Secretary Ger Guinan told *'Emergency Services Ireland'*.

"These facts were published in the Public Service Pay Commission Report. However, what was not mentioned in that report was the number of candidates who fall by the wayside



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GOVERNMENT MEASURES AIM TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS

In October, Paul Kehoe TD, Minister of State with Responsibility for Defence, announced a number of measures to address the situation in the Defence Forces. These include:

- 800 recruits in training by the end of 2017.
- A review of personnel whose fixed-term contracts are set to expire from 2019, with a view to allowing them to remain.
- Promotion of some 300 non-commissioned officers (NCOs).
- Making the Defence Forces a high priority in public service pay talks.



An earlier commitment was also made by the Government to increase the pay of newly qualified three-star privates to €27,000, up from €21,000, and backdated to July 2016.

However, the Minister's set of measures has failed to impress PDFORRA. Its General Secretary Ger Guinan said: "In recognition of the Minister's inability to promise to get the strength to establishment figures of 9,500, we believe that getting personnel to enlist, and subsequently to stay, is extremely unlikely.

"This is based on current rates of pay, conditions of service and the current contractual terms of service. These matters need to be urgently addressed if we are to live up to the commitments made in the Defence Forces' White Paper."



"People joining the Defence Forces do not have the security of tenure enjoyed by other public servants"
 – Ger Guinan, PDFORRA General Secretary

following the initial application.

"Over 60 per cent do not complete the psychometric testing, a further 50 per cent fail the fitness and medical criteria, and more do not pass Garda vetting. Only eight per cent of those who express an initial interest in joining actually reaching a stage where they could be selected."

INCREASING EXODUS OF PERSONNEL

Alongside declining recruitment is the rising tide of personnel leaving the Defence Forces. Figures attained by PDFORRA show that 2,840 personnel departed the Defence Forces within the past five years, equivalent to over 30 per cent of the total number of enlisted personnel.

This turnover is "unsustainable, unhealthy and deeply reflective of the disquiet and disillusionment being felt by our members," said Guinan. "Turnover levels of this magnitude result in significant loss of corporate knowledge which, in turn, may result in injury and death of our comrades."

Reasons for this level of personnel departure may be found in a survey commissioned by the Defence Forces and published by the University of Limerick (highlights in side panel). In the Defence Forces Climate Survey 2016, respondents raised issues such as poor pay, commuting, declining training standards, stress, and safety concerns.



The risks and rewards associated with service currently outweigh any sense of adventure and patriotism that may be held by potential candidates, according to Ger Guinan.

HIGHLIGHTS OF UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK'S SURVEY

The Defence Forces Climate Survey 2016, commissioned by the Irish Defence Forces, was conducted by University of Limerick researchers Dr Juliet MacMahon and Dr Sarah MacCurtain.



Main findings of the report:

- A strong commitment to what the organisation stood for, a pride in the uniform and camaraderie
- A negative perception of family friendly policies and work life balance
- A struggle by those occupying the lowest ranks to identify positives associated with their work
- Dissatisfaction across all ranks with pay for Privates
- Significant middle management gaps at barrack/unit level
- Widespread concern that the loss of experience/corporate knowledge is reaching a critical point and is already affecting operational readiness/capability
- A perceived lack of recognition by the Defence Forces and Department of Defence to the advent of dual career families. This contributes to officers deciding to leave - thus exacerbating the gap in officers at middle and senior levels (and the problems this creates)

The remit was to investigate members' levels of satisfaction with their employment in the Defence Forces, along with other factors such as commitment, leadership and perceptions of fairness and work life balance. Over 1,000 interviewees were drawn from across all ranks and age profiles in the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps.

RISKS AND REWARDS

"The Department of Defence has lost potential candidates through a reasonably-held perception that the Defence Forces is not a good employer, and that the risks and rewards associated with service currently outweigh any sense of adventure and patriotism that may be held by potential candidates," said Guinan

In relation to pay, PDFORRA has longstanding issues with the Department of Defence over delays in payments of allowances, out-of-pocket expenses, subsistence, and a perception

that the defence forces representative associations have not been afforded comparable treatment to other uniformed services of the State in pay talks.

“If the Department of Defence are serious about trying to recruit and retain personnel, they need to offer comparable pay and conditions of service to that which is generally enjoyed in the wider public service,” said Guinan.

SIDELINED BY GOVERNMENT

“Our members have been sidelined by a Government who profess that they will treat us fairly because of the need to exclude us from membership of ICTU, yet they do not give us comparable treatment at pay talks.”

Pay alone is not seen as the solution to the crisis in the Defence Forces, with working conditions – including hours – an ongoing issue. Guinan raised the issue of implementation of the Working Time Directive, stating that personnel such as EOD officers, non-commissioned officers and drivers work 76, 56, and 60 hours respectively per week.

In addition, PDFORRA’s General Secretary said that in the Defence Forces, “146,000 days’ annual leave have been lost since 2012, with a value to the State of somewhere in the region of €17-22 million”. For Guinan and

PDFORRA, the failure to recruit lies deeply imbedded in these types of issues. “People joining the Defence Forces do not have the security of tenure enjoyed by other public servants.

“Their pay is amongst the lowest in the public service and they do not enjoy the protections of basic employment legislation, like the Working Time Directive,” he noted in conclusion.

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