



# COMMISSION TARGETS MAJOR ONGOING ISSUES FOR DEFENCE FORCES

Tasked with undertaking a comprehensive review of the Defence Forces before the end of this year, the next few months will certainly tell the tale if the Commission can fully address and help to remedy the issue of army structures, falling personnel numbers, the need to re-equip and the long-awaited improvement on pay and conditions. Report by Deirdre O'Flynn.

The independent Commission on the Defence Forces, which comprises 15 members with national and international high-level expertise and experience, has been tasked with undertaking a comprehensive review, and to report its recommendations to the Minister for Defence, Simon Coveney TD, by the end of this year.

According to its Terms of Reference, the Commission will have

regard to immediate requirements whilst also seeking to develop a vision for beyond 2030. Informed by both the White Paper on Defence 2015 and the White Paper on Defence Update 2019, the Commission will take account of Ireland's defence requirements, including its overseas commitments and the security role of the Defence Forces here in Ireland.

It will consider and recommend the appropriate structure and size of

the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) and the Reserve Defence Force (RDF). This will encompass consideration of appropriate capabilities, army structures and staffing, the brigade structure, the Air Corps, and the Naval Service along with the appropriate balance and disposition of personnel and structures across a joint force approach in the land, air, maritime, cyber, intelligence and space domains.

With regard to the Reserve Defence Force, the Commission will make a raft of recommendations to better leverage the capabilities of the RDF in their supports to the PDF and to make service in the RDF a more attractive option.

Other areas of review include governance and effective high-level command and control structures in the Defence Forces; remuneration



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systems and structures in the context of a future Permanent Pay Review Body; human resources policies, recruitment, turnover and retention approaches.

**AGILE, FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTIVE**

The ultimate aim, according to Minister Coveney, is to ensure a Defence Forces that is agile, flexible, and adaptive in responding to changes in the security environment, including new and emerging threats and technologies.

As of mid-February, the Commission has met on four occasions, according to its Chairperson, Aidan O'Driscoll. In his statement to 'Emergency Services Ireland', he said that it was very clear from the engagement to date the very considerable, and important, body of work facing the Commission.

"However, I'm delighted with the progress we have made in a relatively short period of time. To date, we've met with a range of key stakeholders, including the three Defence Forces Representative Associations – PDFORRA, RACO and RDFRA.

"Due to COVID restrictions, I very much regret that it has not been possible to commence a planned series of visits to various military installations around the country, but members of the Defence Forces (both Permanent and Reserve) can rest assured that I am determined that these will get underway in some form

as soon as it is safe to do so."

Alongside these meetings, the Commission also started a public consultation in January that will run until mid-March, to seek submissions on Defence Forces' capabilities, structures, staffing and any other comments, with regard to the Terms of Reference.

"There has been a very positive response to date to our public consultation process," said O'Driscoll, and he encourages anyone with views on the Defence Forces to consider making a submission, before the deadline on Friday 19 March (see for details [www.gov.ie/codf](http://www.gov.ie/codf)).

**PERMANENT DEFENCE FORCES**

According to Gerard Guinan, General Secretary of PDFORRA, the association representing soldiers, sailors and aircrew of the Permanent Defence Forces, "the Association is bitterly disappointed at the lack of representation of enlisted personnel on the Commission. All in all, there are four former officers, including the last Chief of Staff, and a number of former reserve officers".

He was critical of the fact that the Commission does not have scope to make recommendations around pay rates, which he said "will come as a surprise to many, especially when it is central to the difficulties being experienced by the organisation".

The issue of pay rates and allowances continues to be a point of contention amongst enlisted personnel, despite the recommendations of the Public Service Pay Commission in 2019. "This is evidenced by a significant number of discharges in 2019 and 2020."

The issue of a potential permanent pay review body is also of concern to PDFORRA. "Our Association has considered the operation and results from the Armed Forces Pay Review Body (AFPRB), which operates to set rates of pay in the British Armed Forces. The results speak for themselves.

"Recent reports from the AFPRB show considerable dissatisfaction levels amongst enlisted personnel and high levels of voluntary outflow. Therefore, PDFORRA believes that the granting of associate membership to ICTU is a fundamental and human right that must be acceded to in the short term."

Aside from the issue of pay, Guinan acknowledged that other



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issues requiring scrutiny, such as contracts, career progression and grievance procedures, fall within the scope of the Commission’s remit.

**COMMISSIONED OFFICERS**

This Commission is “a once-in-a-generation and, perhaps, final opportunity” to address the issues that have brought the Defence Forces to the point whereby the “slow decline through neglect and bad policy for almost a decade” is becoming irreversible, according to Comdt. Conor King, General Secretary of the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers (RACO).

“Numerous reviews and commissions have skirted around the root cause of



**THE NUMBERS GAME**

According to Gerard Guinan, PDFORRA General Secretary, the current membership of the Defence Forces stands at approximately 8,500, if lag times for recruitment and discharges are taken into consideration. “This is approximately 1,000 personnel below establishment levels, with the primary shortfall amongst the enlisted ranks,” he said.

“Given the lean nature of the Defence Forces’ since its reorganisation in 2012, deficiencies like these inhibit certain operational commitments, such as putting ships to sea,” he added.

However, while officer numbers appear healthy, according to Comdt. Conor King, RACO Secretary General, “this is due to unprecedented numbers of new entrants over the last few years. We have replaced experience with raw cadets, and this has implications for supervision and mentoring, not to mention risk and governance.

“Worryingly, 30% of the officer body has less than five years’ service. There are currently 42% of army captains unavailable for operational taskings in Ireland, due to vacancies, overseas service, and long-term training courses.

“The situation is just as difficult in the Naval Service and Air Corps, particularly in the specialist and technician streams. Air Corps pilot numbers have recently improved due to a recommissioning/re-entry scheme, but it is unclear how many will remain in service once the aviation industry recovers post-COVID-19.

“There are 620 unfilled Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) vacancies throughout the organisation. This has a profound impact on mentoring, supervision, and governance, and increases organisational risk.”



In relation to the RDF, only about 1,500 personnel remain operationally effective out of “an established size of just over 4,000 for both Army Reserve and Naval Service Reserve”, said Eugene Gargan, RFDRA President.

“A combination of natural wastage, recruitment difficulties and the challenge of retaining trained personnel has all taken their toll.” Indeed, shortages of personnel in key administrative and training appointments further compound the challenges in dealing with recruitment and training, he said, adding that “the effect of an almost complete shutdown of Reserve activities during the pandemic will doubtlessly further erode our numbers”.





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this decline, without actually addressing it – the failure to adequately resource defence in order to retain highly qualified and experienced personnel to maintain capability,” he added.

According to RACO, the Commission must look at where the Defence Forces fit into facing the threats posed to the State and what resources are required to execute its mission. “It must recommend a better structure for the governance and command of the Defence Forces, with more control over budget given to the Chief of Staff, and an appropriate overseas and training establishment to take the pressure off units,” said King.

Retention, remuneration, and pensions should also be addressed, according to RACO. “The Commission is mandated to implement a permanent pay review body which recognises the unique nature of military service. Like our other uniformed colleagues in An Garda Síochána, Defence Forces personnel face restrictions unlike any other group, which have been exploited, rather than rewarded or compensated for.

“Our members forego the right to trade union membership and its associated right to strike. They willingly submit themselves to abide by Military Law. They are required to achieve strict annual medical and fitness standards and are liable to be posted away from family for

extended periods of time.

“They also bear an Unlimited Liability in their service to the State, ultimately willingly volunteering to place themselves in harm’s way. Unfortunately, this loyalty and commitment to serve has attracted much praise but little else from successive governments,” Comdt Conor King noted.

### RESERVE DEFENCE FORCES

The Reserve Defence Forces Representative Association (RDFRA), which advocates on behalf of officers and other ranks of the Army Reserve and Naval Service Reserve, welcomes the establishment of the Commission and the broad range of perspectives, experience, and

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expertise of its members.

RDFRA would like the Commission to address its immediate concerns urgently, according to Eugene Gargan, RDFRA President. "At the outbreak of the pandemic, the operational state of the Reserve was in dire need of remedial actions to address critical issues with delays to recruitment and retention of experienced and trained personnel. Only when these problems are effectively addressed can consideration be given to broader strategic and long-term objectives."

The Commission is "possibly the last opportunity we will have to contribute to a reshaping of long-term government defence policy", he said. Gargan acknowledged that the Minister for Defence and the new Secretary General in the Department and new staff "bring with them a new and fresh approach to the complex problem of planning our military defence disposition".

He said that they recognise the value an effective, properly resourced Reserve can provide, adding that the RDFRA expects the Commission to "propose a solution to the long-held question of our strategic purpose and, with it, the means to effectively address our other issues".



*When contacted by 'Emergency Services Ireland the Defence Forces' Chief of the Staff, Vice Admiral Mark Mellett, declined to comment until the Commission has presented its report to the Minister at the end of the year.*

**MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMISSION ON THE DEFENCE FORCES**

- Chair: Aidan O'Driscoll, former Secretary General, Department of Agriculture 2015-2018 and Department of Justice and Equality 2018-2020.
- Peter Brazel, retired civil servant.
- Admiral Haakon Bruun-Hanssen, retired Norwegian Chief of Defence (2020).
- Shay Cody, former Chair of ICTU Public Services Committee and retired Senior General Secretary of Forsa 2010-2019.
- Maura Conway, Professor of International Security, DCU School of Law and Government.
- Marie Cross, retired Assistant Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs, former Ambassador to the EU Political-Security Committee (PSC).
- Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, Danish researcher and security policy expert. Member of the advisory group to the NATO Secretary General on NATO 2030.
- Dan Harvey, military historian, museum curator and retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Defence Forces.
- Caitriona Heintz, Executive Director at the Azure Forum for Contemporary Security Strategy, Ireland and Adjunct Research Fellow at the School of Politics and International Relations at UCD.
- John Minihan, former Senator and retired Captain in the Defence Forces.
- Lieutenant General Conor O'Boyle (Retd.), former Irish Defence Forces Chief of Staff.
- Lieutenant General Esa Pulkkinen, Finnish Military Officer with a rank equivalent to Defence Forces Chief of Staff.
- Geraldine Tallon, former Chair of Department of Defence Audit Committee (2014-2019).
- Dr Gerry Waldron, Director of Slándáil (National Security Summit Ireland), and former Defence Forces officer.
- Jane Williams, Managing Partner, SIA Partners Management Consultants.



Coimisiún um Óglaigh na hÉireann  
Commission on the Defence Forces