



DEFENCE FORCES – RESOURCING THE STATE'S INSURANCE POLICY

Global pandemics and cyber-attacks were, until recently, high-level threats that we have acknowledged, but for which we failed to adequately prepare. As we are all too aware, both have come to pass, and the State has scrambled to mitigate the threat, according to Commandant Conor King, RACO General Secretary.

The Defence Forces has proven its worth assisting the HSE in the fight against COVID-19 and participated in a variety of tasks ranging from tracing to testing, and from logistics support to vaccinations and quarantine.

Defence underpins Ireland's security as well as the promotion of the State's strategic interests in the international environment¹. The country's economic success is closely tied up with its ability to provide a secure environment for many of the world's leading technology companies to operate.

A strong Defence Forces, as the State's insurance policy, is vital for the continued inflow of foreign direct investment, essential for our small open economy. Our security is heavily dependent on our cyber resilience and there is growing alarm at Ireland's vulnerability in this regard.

The recent cyber-attack on the HSE was a wake-up call to the country, and once more the Defence Forces proved

its value, in helping to get the organisation's IT systems back online.

A capacity to respond quickly, professionally and in an agile manner to imminent threats is only possible if the organisation retains the skills acquired through years of training and experience at home and overseas. Our difficulties in retaining highly skilled personnel due to inadequate remuneration and conditions of service has had a severe impact on our operational capability, which has left us vulnerable.

SUBMISSION TO COMMISSION

In February 2021, RACO made its submission to the Commission on the Defence Forces. The Commission is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to have a serious conversation about the range of threats facing the State, and where the Defence organisation fits into the mitigation of these threats.



Assisting the HSE in the fight against COVID-19, Defence Forces personnel participated in a range of tasks from tracing to testing, logistics support to vaccinations and quarantine.

It has the scope to make a real difference to the organisation, and it cannot be allowed to fail. We are trying desperately to replenish our strength, but until we significantly improve the 'offer' then we will only ever be running to stand still.

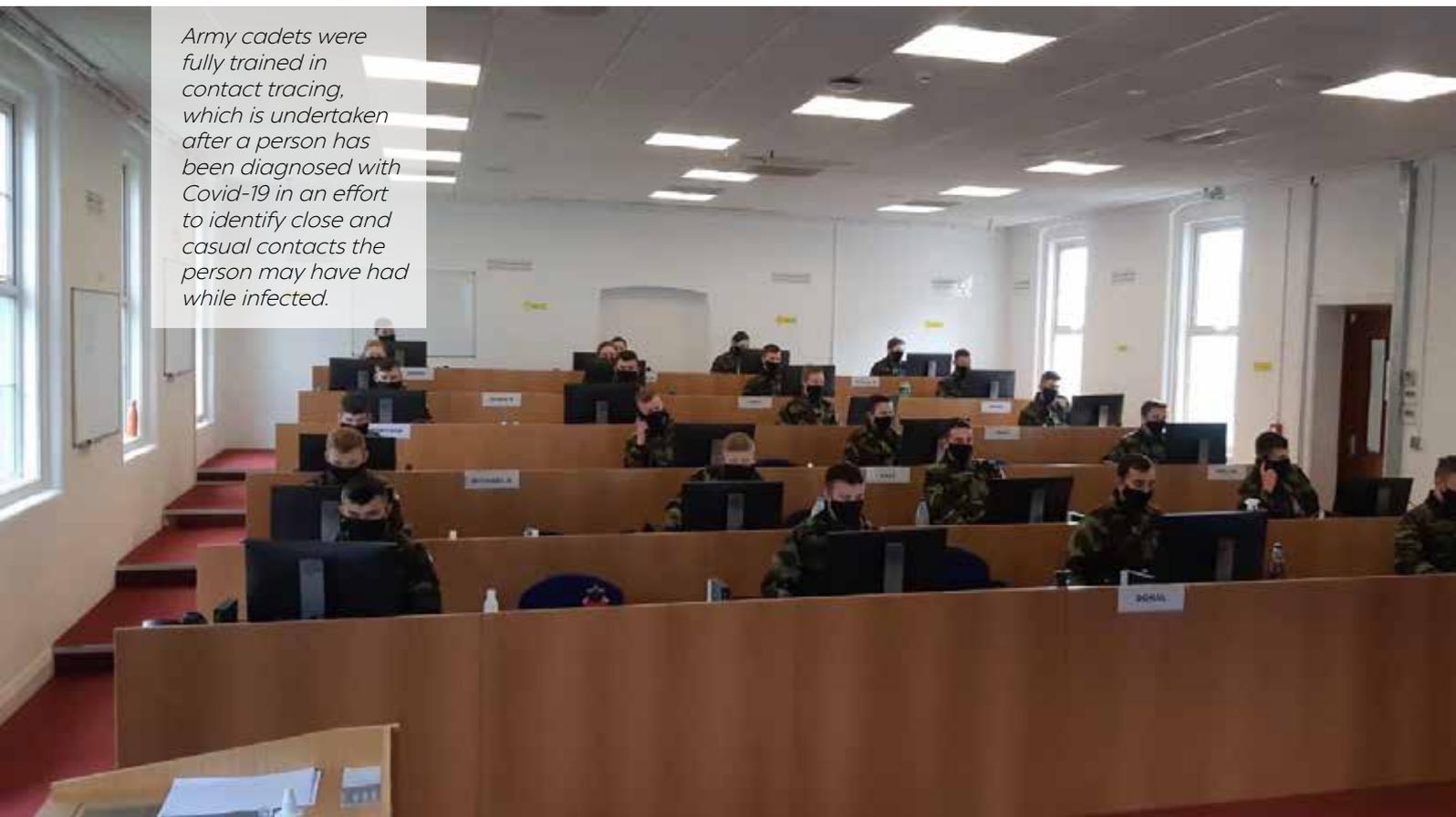
Our overseas service, the physical embodiment of Ireland's foreign policy, must be bolstered by an adequate overseas establishment structure, and the same goes for our in-house training function.

This would put an end to the misleading and dispiriting

fallacy of counting untrained personnel in Defence Forces strength figures. Currently we have just over 8,100 fully trained personnel on our books, which is 85% of our minimum designed strength, before we even look at the 600 personnel deployed overseas.

It has been encouraging to note the sheer volume of submissions that have been presented to Aidan O'Driscoll and his team, and there is a feeling that the value of Defence is beginning to be recognised by our key stakeholders.

Army cadets were fully trained in contact tracing, which is undertaken after a person has been diagnosed with Covid-19 in an effort to identify close and casual contacts the person may have had while infected.





One of the many contact tracing briefings with HSE Director General Paul Reid.

INVESTMENT IN DEFENCE

Submissions from other government departments, from industry and academia has brought home the reliance placed on the Defence Forces by the State, and the need to invest in our institution.

Where the Commission’s terms of reference note that ‘in arriving at its findings and recommendations for arrangements for the effective defence of the country, the Commission will have regard to the level of funding provided by Government for Defence’², it is earnestly hoped that this funding will be adequate to meet the demands generated by the expert’s recommendations, and these recommendations will not be constrained by the resources available.

Planning without resources is simply dreaming; we have a poor track record of policy implementation in the defence sector; from the White Paper on Defence to the High-Level Implementation Plan.

If this Commission is to have any credibility, and deliver real reform, then its recommendations must be fully resourced and accompanied by a strong implementation oversight body, to ensure that its good work is not allowed to wither on the vine. We cannot afford another false dawn.

RESEARCH RESULTS ‘WORRYING’

RACO continues to seek the implementation of the health and safety measures of the Working Time Directive (WTD) for our members. As if the UL Climate Survey and Focus Group reports, and the findings of the ‘Engage to Change’ Public Service Pay Commission research were not enough, the recent survey of over one 100 recently retired DF officers who left the organisation prematurely, demonstrates that little has changed in terms of work life balance, career management, stress, and burnout.

The results of this research are worrying, with 30% of retiring officers stating that they would not recommend a career in the organisation to a family member or friend,



The Defence Forces erected a number of vaccination tents such as these ones outside the Citywest Convention Centre, and assisted in the vaccination

with a further 34% only recommending a career in the DF if significant improvements to conditions of service occur.

Notwithstanding the obvious resource challenges, Defence Forces personnel continue to put their shoulders to the wheel for the State. The work of the Joint Task Force in co-ordinating these efforts highlights the versatile and steadfast insurance policy that the Defence Forces provides to our citizens.

We cannot allow the likes of COVID-19 and the inevitable shock to the public finances to be a reason not to invest in Defence. By any metric, be it percentage of GDP, GNI or public sector spend, the funds allocated to Defence are wholly inadequate to meet the threats that the Government has identified in its Defence policy.

On the contrary, it is specifically for ‘Black Swan’ events such as a global pandemic that we need the robust national insurance policy that the Defence Forces provides.

We must acknowledge and reward our people’s efforts in facilitating the organisation’s essential contribution to national resilience (notwithstanding the meagre Defence Budget)³ and to continually argue that the insurance policy which the State demands from the Defence Forces can only be comprehensive, if it is properly funded and resourced.

REFERENCES:

¹White Paper on Defence, 2015

²Terms of Reference - Commission on the Defence Forces

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b69da-commission-on-the-defence-forces-terms-of-reference/>

³Ireland spends the lowest on Defence as a % of GDP in the EU.

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Government_expenditure_on_defence

Images are courtesy of Defence Force PR Branch.