

*“Our uniform does not make us less people. It is a cloak of our service, a curtailer of our weakness, an amplifier of our strengths.”* General Richard Mulcahy

For over 100 years the Irish Defence Forces has resolutely remained, *the servant of the nation*, and a bulwark of democracy. From the Civil War, the challenges faced during the years of violence in Northern Ireland, supporting the rule of law, multiple deployments overseas upholding peace, protecting our skies and maritime space and responding to national emergencies including cyberattacks and the recent pandemic. The Irish Defence Forces have always been ready to serve. With a war in Europe, a more fragmented and volatile world where the rule based order is threatened and new threats are emerging - security and defence matters are once again a significant geopolitical and indeed national issue. Just this week this State is faced with the repercussions of the outbreak of civil war in Sudan and the consequences for Irish citizens trapped there. Our thoughts are with our citizens and the Emergency Civil Assistance Team (ECAT) including twelve members of the Defence Forces, currently tasked with getting them to safety.

To meet all these external challenges the Irish Defence Forces are adapting, reorganising, and transforming. While we ready ourselves to face these external challenges there are serious internal issues that must be urgently addressed. Recruitment and retention remain priorities, but the serious cultural challenges highlighted in the recently published Independent Review Group (IRG) report into the Defence Forces is by far the most urgent. It is a stark and important report. The Leadership of the Defence Forces accept this report and is committed to implementing its recommendations. I want to thank and commend all those, including the Women of Honour, who have come forward and courageously brought their lived experiences to light. Working with our colleagues in the Department of Defence, we are committed to redesign grievance procedures and HR policies, rolling out mandatory Sexual Ethics and Respectful Relationships workshops and holding personnel to account for misconduct and misbehaviour. Change is underway and updated policies and procedures will be underpinned by the principles of mutual respect, dignity and equality.

Since being appointed Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, I have made it abundantly clear, there is no place for any form of abusive, inappropriate, or criminal behaviour in the Defence Forces. We stand ready to fully support the implementation of the IRG recommendations and I fully expect that the statutory inquiry will determine the extent of the issues brought to light in the IRG report. We responded immediately after the Women of Honour documentary in 2021 by setting in train our initial responses to transform our culture. This work alongside the IRG recommendations sets the scene to build a better, stronger and safer Defence Forces that protects, develops and nurtures our most valued resource – our people.

Two weeks after the publication of the IRG report, 59 young people took their first steps in uniform as Defence Forces recruits in our new Joint Induction Training Centre (JITC). This centre will prepare young men and women for their diverse careers in the future Army, Navy and Air Force. Each of these 59 candidates will be registered with the South East Technological University, the first step on the Professional Military Education pathway underpinning our approach to lifelong learning. Their training in the JITC is designed to develop physically fit, disciplined and motivated members with basic military skills, along with an understanding of our organisational values, ethos and acceptable behaviours.

All of us in the Defence Forces have reflected on our own service and what was known through the reported incidents of inappropriate and criminal behaviour. Despite Independent Monitoring Group (IMG) reports in 2004, 2008 and 2014 and reports from the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces indicating qualitative and quantitative improvements in organisation culture, the truth is that for some this was not a reality. In addition, the accounts of those who engaged with the IRG described a lack of confidence in reporting and fear of reprisal preventing many from speaking out before now.

The General Staff and I have recently completed nationwide briefings with our people and Veterans groups to discuss the IRG report. The experiences described in the report has brought a feeling of shame among the majority - the good men, women, and veterans of the Defence Forces. The hurt felt by serving members and veterans extends to their families and friends, who through their support and commitment, have also been deeply wounded by the actions of some Defence Forces members.

The pathway to change has begun, is necessary and there is no turning back. Transformation is essential to address cultural change internally, and as I described earlier, vital to meet the emerging external threats in a changing world. In recent decades change in our Defence Forces has mainly come in the form of downsizing. Now, the Commission of Defence Forces (CODF) report provides a real opportunity to transform your Defence Forces into a fit for purpose military force with the capacity to defend our sovereignty, protect our people and help secure Ireland's interests.

The serving men and women across all ranks, permanent and reserve, and the veterans of the Defence Forces recognise that the road we face is not easy. This is our *watershed moment*. I have every confidence that the upcoming Statutory Inquiry will bring clarity, find facts and will support our shared determination to eliminate unacceptable or criminal behaviours within the Defence Forces.

The IRG and the CODF provide us with the route towards the necessary transformation of our force where the protectors can protect and where the protectors are protected, just as General Mulcahy had envisaged. The feelings of shame and anger felt as a result of the actions of some, will strengthen our resolve. I believe we have the courage to embrace these changes, it will show all that is good about

your Defence Forces and its women and men who remain proud to serve this State. Together we will build a Defence Forces for today and for the future, with a culture founded on dignity, equality and respect of which Ireland can continue to be proud.