

**Social
Democrats**

Defence & Security

National Security & Emergency Planning

**For the Future
It Starts Here**

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Introductory Note

The purpose of this document is to communicate the Social Democrats' positions on national defence and security, and to suggest some actions that would prepare Ireland to meet the diverse and complex security challenges of today and tomorrow.

It is not the party's intention to determine or dictate all of the exact structures the Department of Defence or Defence Forces should adopt, or equipment and technology they should acquire. Such things are best left to the operational and strategic planning branches of each institution. These offices should be encouraged and empowered to make recommendations on these and other issues.

What is certain is that leaving things as they are – current budgets, current strategies and structures – will leave the Defence Forces unable to effectively conduct defence and security operations within the State, and likely require a reduced commitment to international peace support, crisis management, and humanitarian operations due to capacity constraints.

This document is a short-to-medium term overview of some of what we believe is required, designed to give guidance and contribute to building a sustainable foundation on which a strong, modern and flexible defence and security framework can develop within the Department of Defence, centred around the Irish Defence Forces.

Key Points

In government, the Social Democrats will:

- Maintain Ireland's **neutrality**.
- Reconfigure the **Department of Defence as the Department of Defence, Security and Emergency Planning**.
- Create within that Department an **Office of National Defence and Security Monitoring and Threat Assessment**.
- Develop a new **National Defence and Security Framework**.
- Create an **Office of National Information, Cyber and Data Defence and Security** to coordinate many of the functions of the various bodies currently responsible for Ireland's data, information and cyber-security.
- **Invest in the Defence Forces** to ensure sustainable funding levels that support a personnel establishment of 11,500 active members plus 500 in training, and enhance recruitment and retention strategies.
- **Address the issues around pay and conditions faced by Defence Forces** personnel that are inhibiting goals around recruitment and retention.
- **Equip the Defence Forces with the systems and technologies** required to effectively carry out national defence and security roles in the 21st century.
- **Develop the Defence Forces' rank, pay and promotion systems** to ensure they evolve with new practices, technologies and skillsets.
- Create an **Active Reserve** to capture leaving and retired personnel, and utilise specialists within the Reserve Defence Forces.
- Explore the creation of a **Defence Forces History and Heritage Board**.
- Establish a **Veterans' Commissioner and Veterans' Support Office**.
- Develop a comprehensive **Veterans' Policy and enhance veteran services**.

Ireland's Defence and Security Context

Since the foundation of the modern Irish State in 1922, the Irish Defence Forces worked to secure our national territory, and conducted mandated peacekeeping missions abroad; a contribution of which we are rightly proud as a nation.

Since joining the United Nations in 1955, Ireland's diplomats, humanitarian workers, and police and military personnel **have helped bring stability and peace** to unstable areas of the world and have been among the world leaders in maintaining peace in some of the most insecure regions around the globe.

However, the defence and security challenges facing Ireland have never been more complex and diverse, and perhaps never has Ireland been so ill-equipped to handle them.

The defence and security landscape has transformed significantly, with resurgent geopolitical tensions and climate change exacerbating global instability. Recent pandemics and increasing numbers of displaced individuals further challenge our emergency planning and resource allocation, and trans-national organised crime and terrorism have blurred the distinction between the roles of the military and police.

Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and destabilised areas in the Sahel and North Africa continue to devastate countries, displace populations, and destabilise regions, contributing to increased migration pressures and security concerns for the EU, including Ireland. These conflicts have compounded existing fragility and fuelled environmental disasters, human rights breaches, human trafficking, poor governance, and trans-national organised crime and terrorist fundamentalists. There has also been a noticeable geopolitical shift from unipolarity to multipolarity. Tensions and war have returned to continental Europe, with global consequences.

Ireland has not escaped the effects of these conflicts and instability. These conflicts have directly impacted Ireland and tested its ability to respond to them: with rises in the costs of living, especially in energy and food, and an unprecedented number of refugees arriving to escape the horrors of war. Ireland's unique position as an island state on the west coast of Europe has historically insulated it from direct conflict; however, this geographic isolation

also brings vulnerabilities, particularly in terms of maritime security and dependence on international trade routes.

As an island Ireland heavily relies on maritime trade, with the vast majority of our imports coming via the sea. These sea lane trade routes are of global importance. Ireland possesses a continental shelf that covers approximately 888,000 km²; an area we struggle to patrol.

As geopolitical tensions have increased Irish airspace has been probed by foreign air forces testing the responses of our nearby neighbours. At sea Ireland's Air Corps and Naval Service conduct maritime defence and security patrols to ensure our sea lanes remain open, protect our natural resources, and interdict arms and drugs.

Overseas Ireland's Defence Forces, diplomats and aid agencies continuously deploy to areas such as Africa, the Mediterranean, and Middle East with multinational missions to help bring stability and security to those regions.

Adding to these challenges, the emergence of **hybrid threats**, involving low-intensity but high-impact activities such as **cyber-attacks**, **data breaches**, and **disinformation campaigns**, orchestrated often through third parties, underscores the necessity for robust **national cyber defences** and strategic information security measures.

These hybrid challenges generally take place in a space regarded as the 'grey zone', where the end goal is strategic disruption rather than all-out war. This ambiguous space is of huge concern for a state's defence and security. Rather than all-out war, a state can literally find itself in the dark after a cyber-attack on its electricity grid, or a disruption to its energy supply/reserves.

However, the aforementioned geopolitical tensions, Covid-19 pandemic, effects of climate change, and the HSE cyber-attack of 2021 have all highlighted Ireland's vulnerabilities, and inability to monitor and forecast threats, while the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces has called attention to the deficiencies in those forces and other agencies regarding their capability to support the State in these areas.

This document proposes strategic recommendations aimed at **developing a robust defence and security framework**, enhancing Ireland's capability to

monitor, predict, and respond effectively to evolving global threats, ensuring a proactive rather than reactive posture.

A whole-of-government approach will ensure a comprehensive holistic capability is developed which will improve synergies, create a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities per scenario, and pool budgets and resources.

The government departments tasked with Ireland's defence **must be adequately resourced**. The Defence Forces, as the primary state organisation tasked with defence in Ireland, must be given the funding necessary to accommodate and pay its personnel, train units, and meet the challenges of today and the future, wherever they are deployed.

It is also important that national defence and security policy reflect a state's core values. To meet the commitments and challenges of the 21st century the State must:

- Take a comprehensive **whole-of-government approach** to national defence and security.
- Develop a new **National Defence and Security Framework**.
- **Invest in the Defence Forces** with the goal of bringing funding to a sustainable level that would allow the Forces to fulfil the tasks assigned to them.

Our recommendations would:

- **Improve synergies** between State departments and agencies.
- Foster **innovation and leadership**.
- **Utilise and pool** budgets, knowledge, and resources.
- **Structure and resource State bodies** such as the Defence Forces to predict, monitor and meet, and (where possible) prevent future challenges.

Defence, Security & Emergency Planning

Aside from some internal threats, national defence and security – while historically not a priority – has gained prominence due to evolving global threats.

Ireland's geographical position as an island state and small size has also contributed to an attitude of apathy towards national defence, **resulting in an element of risk and threat blindness**. This has no doubt contributed to consistently low defence spending. Today, Irish defence spending is typically around a quarter of 1 per cent¹ of GDP, one of the lowest in the world. **Ireland has limited defence/security analysis and threat assessment/monitoring capability**, and has yet to fully embrace the reality that in the 21st century the traditional paradigms of defence and security have become blurred.

Ireland now finds itself in a position where it cannot defend its own air or sea space. In reality Ireland has unofficially and quietly relied on the assumption that its allies will come to its defence if necessary.

Ireland must maintain its traditional stance of neutrality, which has historically kept us out of direct geopolitical conflicts, while adapting to some modern complexities that require a more engaged security position.

Ireland's Neutrality

Irish neutrality is difficult to define, never having been enshrined in legislation.

Since the founding of the State, Ireland has firmly been a proponent of international law and peace, and an adamant opponent to war. Ireland was admitted to the League of Nations in 1923, and in 1928 was one of the first signatories of The Kellogg-Briand Pact: a multilateral agreement that intended to establish “the renunciation of war as an instrument of national policy”.

Ireland has never signed up to any collective-defence alliance, such as NATO. While adopting the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Ireland did not sign up to its collective-defence mechanism.

¹ This figure includes the Department of Defence, Defence Forces, and part of Civil Defence and Red Cross. It also includes pensions to retired personnel.

Ireland's position is clarified to some extent in Article 29.9 of the Irish Constitution: "The State shall not adopt a decision taken by the European Council to establish a common defence pursuant to Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union where that common defence would include the State." This is supplemented somewhat by the 2015 White Paper on Defence which states the policy "is characterised by non-membership of military alliances and non-participation in common or mutual defence arrangements".

In addition, Ireland's military deployment is dictated by its White Paper on Defence and the so-called 'Triple Lock'. The White Paper on Defence places restrictions on the overseas deployment of air and naval assets, while ensuring army personnel are only committed to crisis-management missions. For any deployment of more than 12 military personnel there must be a government decision, Dáil approval, and a UN mandate (**the 'Triple Lock'**); **something the Social Democrats strongly support.**

Though Ireland is a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme, it has limited participation. **The Social Democrats in government will maintain Ireland's position of neutrality.**

Our Current Defence and Security Structures

Ireland's defence and security framework is still primarily based on a traditional view of defence and security, resulting in siloed activities, poor coordination, and duplicated spending. The responsibility for national defence is with the Minister for Defence, the Department of Defence, and the Defence Forces. The Defence Forces are in turn responsible for the air, land, and maritime defence of the State. The Department also has responsibility for Emergency Planning and Civil Defence.

In addition, throughout the year the Defence Forces augments state security requirements by providing Aid to Civil Powers and Aid to Civil Authorities, to government departments, agencies and local authorities on request, and through Service Level Agreements.

Through the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland addresses the broader international security challenges through collective security. This is achieved through membership of the United Nations (UN), the Organisation of Security

Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, and the European Union (EU). It deploys diplomats, humanitarian aid workers, and military and police personnel to various overseas missions.

National Emergency Planning is carried out through the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning, the Framework for Major Emergency Management (Framework) and the Strategic Emergency Management (SEM) National Structures and Framework. The Framework deals with major emergencies while the SEM deals with emergencies escalated to a national level.

The two documents outline the roles and responsibilities of each government department in the event of multiple scenarios. In the event of an emergency, the Office of Emergency Planning in the Department of Defence provides support, coordination, and oversight of the inter-departmental subgroups, the government Task Force, and the Minister for Defence as Chairman of the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning.

In turn each local authority is responsible for coordinating and funding Emergency Planning and Civil Defence in its area.

Ireland's security framework is much broader, ranging from the National Security Adviser and the National Security Analysis Centre to An Garda Síochána, and including the Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, the Coast Guard, and Customs.

Ireland's broader security assets and capabilities span several departments and agencies. The Social Democrats believe **there would be benefit in having a government department dedicated to national security, in which could be situated all the main elements of Ireland's national defence and security apparatus**, and suggest re-styling the Department of Defence as the **Department of National Defence, Security and Emergency Planning**.

Such a department can help foster a whole of government approach across State departments and agencies, improve synergy, help pool expertise and capabilities, as well as avoiding duplication of effort. This department would provide for a well-coordinated joint response to national defence and security threats and emergencies.

Recommendations:

- **Re-establish the Department of Defence as the Department of National Defence, Security and Emergency Planning.**

Such a department can help foster a whole of government approach across State departments and agencies, improve synergy, help pool expertise and capabilities, as well as avoiding duplication of effort.

- Create within that Department an **Office of National Defence and Security Monitoring and Threat Assessment** capable of drawing on assessments and analysis from across departments, assessing them for risks and threats, and helping monitor and forecast risks and threats to the State.
- Conduct, via the department, a full national defence and security audit across **Ireland's Critical Infrastructure and Key Resources (CIKR) and Military, Informational, Diplomatic, Financial, Intelligence, Economic, Law, and Development (MIDFIELD)** that will identify all State roles, responsibilities, capabilities and existing assets related to security.

Such an audit should also identify silos, gaps, vulnerabilities, and areas of duplication and wasteful spending.

- Develop a comprehensive **National Defence, Security and Emergency Planning Policy** that will provide a single consolidated picture of current and future threats and will set out across all State departments and agencies their roles, responsibilities and objectives. This Policy should be regularly reviewed and include comprehensive sub-policies on:
 - **National Maritime Defence and Security**
 - **National Aviation Defence and Security**
 - **National Information Defence and Security**
- **Establish a National Defence & Security College** in the Defence Forces Training Centre to include training for State agencies as required.
- Increase exercises and familiarity with the **Emergency Planning Framework**, which should be regularly reviewed.

Current Threats

Three main categories of threat highlight and demonstrate the complexities of today's defence and security environment: Geopolitical, the Climate Crisis, and Information Security.

Many geopolitical events over the past decade have highlighted Ireland's deficiencies and inability to monitor and analyse threats and developing situations, and to defend and secure its air and maritime space.

Ireland has no air force or air surveillance radar capability. It relies on neighbours to defend its airspace, and due to personnel shortages in the Naval Service, it has had to call on neighbours to conduct patrols in its waters.

In addition, the Air Corps and Naval Service are limited in their ability to monitor activities in this space. **The Air Corps has two medium-range maritime patrol aircraft, and the Naval Service lacks SONAR capability,** giving it no ability to monitor sub-surface activity.

Among the other geopolitical threats immediately affecting Ireland's defence and security are transnational organised crime and the international drugs trade using Irish waters as a gateway to Europe.

Being an island, Ireland conducts the vast majority of its trade by sea, **making defending and securing Irish sea lanes of vital importance.** Climate change will lead to changing dynamics in this area, as a retracted Arctic opens new northern sea lanes, resulting in increased maritime traffic off the Irish coast. While in recent years air probing missions have used Ireland's airspace to test the resolve of its closest neighbour and European allies.

The escalating effects of climate change, such as rising sea levels, severe droughts, and more frequent storms, continue to strain global emergency resources and infrastructure. For Ireland, this necessitates robust emergency response strategies and enhanced resilience planning to **safeguard national energy and food security.**

Military assets in support of civil powers to tackle such disasters are commonplace and Ireland is no exception. However, in Ireland's case these additional roles have been placed on an organisation with inadequate resources.

While developed states have capability to respond to such disasters, the threat multiplier effect on poorer states can be more devastating.

Natural or man-made disasters know no borders, and can simultaneously hit one or several countries without warning. **A state requires a well-coordinated joint response mechanism. The destabilising effects of climate change have led to UN and EU civil military crisis-management missions.** Ireland has already participated in several missions that can be attributed to the threat multiplier effects of climate change.

However, Ireland has practically no strategic air or naval capability to support civil or military deployments. During a Naval Service deployment to the Mediterranean in 2015, deployment of air assets was discussed, however the Air Corps lacks the equipment and personnel to sustain such a deployment.

As the climate crisis intensifies, Ireland may be increasingly required to deploy civil and military assets to affected areas, at home and abroad. **However, the Defence Forces limited capabilities have become very evident.** It has no air or maritime strategic lift capability for deploying large scale military or civil-military, or civil-protection, missions abroad.

While not an immediate term priority, the Air Corps should aspire to having adequate strategic lift capability for the purpose of deploying personnel on UN-mandated missions and humanitarian aid missions. As the climate crisis intensifies in years to come, Ireland will be increasingly required to deploy at home and overseas civil and military assets to affected areas.

As a major global hub for data and information, Ireland faces heightened risks from cyber-attacks, which could lead to significant economic losses and compromise national security. Strengthening our cybersecurity infrastructure and response capabilities is imperative to protect against these evolving threats. **The 2021 HSE cyber-attack demonstrated Ireland's vulnerabilities and showed that Ireland is not immune from such belligerent actions.**

It also brought to government and public attention the type of attack Ireland can expect to face in the future. Information warfare does not require 'boots on the ground' in the conventional sense, and so a robust information and data protection framework is needed to protect a country's interests.

The State is in large part responsible for the Confidentiality, Integrity and Availability of information and data within its borders. It achieves this through compliance and enforcement of legislation. While Ireland has an Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, the Data Protection Commission and the National Cyber Security Centre, these bodies were not formed with national information defence and security in their remit.

The Social Democrats propose the **appointment of a National Information Security Officer and the creation of an Office of National Information, Cyber and Data Defence and Security.** The office would coordinate many of the functions of the various bodies currently responsible for Ireland's data, information and cyber-security and would sit within the new Department of National Defence, Security and Emergency Planning.

Ireland needs to be capable of monitoring, forecasting, preparing for, and responding to, all potential risks and threats. This requires the development of a comprehensive holistic defence, security and emergency planning framework that will provide a single consolidated picture of current and future threats and that can set out the necessary roles, responsibilities and objectives of all State departments and agencies for any scenario.

Recommendations:

- **Develop a comprehensive holistic defence, security and emergency planning framework** to respond to future threats and coordinate the necessary roles, responsibilities and objectives of all State departments and agencies for any scenario.
- Create an **Office of National Information, Cyber and Data Defence and Security** that would coordinate many of the functions of the various bodies currently responsible for Ireland's data, information and cyber-security. The Office would sit within the newly re-established Department of National Defence, Security and Emergency Planning.
- Consider the creation of a **Civil Protection Rapid Response Corps** that can be deployed overseas in response to natural disasters.
- **Equip the Defence Forces with the systems and technologies** required to effectively carry out national defence and security roles in the 21st century, including **SONAR and Air Surveillance Radar.**

An International Defence and Security Actor

Ireland, a member of the United Nations and the European Union, has long recognised that its defence and security extend beyond traditional borders. Maintaining its stance of neutrality, Ireland has committed its defence and security assets to global peace and security initiatives since the 1950s.

Ireland proudly holds a unique record of continuous service in UN blue helmet peacekeeping operations since 1958, underscoring its commitment to international peacekeeping. Since then, Irish peacekeepers have served on more than 40 peacekeeping operations around the world including in Afghanistan, the Balkans, East Timor, Rwanda, the Mediterranean, and Lebanon.

Irish Defence Forces personnel have completed over 70,000 individual tours of duty overseas since 1958. This service has not been without cost. To date 87 members of the Defence Forces and one member of An Garda Síochána have given their lives in the service of peace abroad.

Despite our neutrality, Ireland's commitment to international peace and security is firm, as demonstrated through its membership of the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Past-memberships of the United Nations Security Council are indicative of Ireland's international standing. As an extension of Ireland's foreign policy, Irish diplomats, and civil, military and police experts continue to help strengthen the rule of law, democracy and human rights around the world.

Ireland's Defence Forces, along with diplomats, Irish Aid and members of An Garda Síochána, have been deployed around the world to help bring peace and stability to vulnerable areas. Crisis-management, peace-building, peace-keeping, and peace-enforcement missions have seen Defence Forces personnel and Gardaí dealing with a diverse array of challenges across the security spectrum, while Irish Aid continues its work in election monitoring, and programmes in sub-Saharan Africa to reduce poverty and hunger.

As the security environment grows ever more precarious Ireland will continue to deploy civilian and military personnel and assets to overseas missions. It is important the Defence Forces are adequately equipped to carry out such operations.

The Defence Forces

The State's main defence and security actor is the Defence Forces.

Their role is unique and diverse, ranging from peace-enforcement overseas to narcotics interdiction, Air Ambulance to Counter Improvised Explosive Device (C-IED), and ISTAR (Intelligence Surveillance Target Acquisition) to keeping sea lanes of communication open.

The Defence Forces carry out a wide range of roles for the State. As the international security environment grows ever more precarious it is the Defence Forces that will carry out Ireland's overseas peace-keeping missions. **Ensuring they are adequately equipped for the task must be a central pillar of policy.**

Defence and security issues emerging around the world are of an increasingly complex nature. In response to extreme weather, natural disasters, and the effects of climate change, militaries around the world, including Ireland, regularly deploy assets in support of Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief.

Despite increasing operational demands, the Defence Forces have faced significant neglect and systematic reductions since the 1999 White Paper on Defence. This has led to decreased capabilities, impacting their effectiveness across both domestic and international missions. Barrack closures, closure of family quarters, unit disbandment, recruitment embargos, a shift from the flexible geographical command structure to fixed brigades, and a constant struggle with budgets began to put strain on the service in the early 2000s.

The organisation has struggled to recover from the re-organisation of 2010-2012, and the decentralisation of its longstanding Headquarters. In the name of austerity, more barracks were closed, units disappeared overnight, and corps reduced to all but cadre status. An unquantifiable amount of State investment in training of expert specialist personnel has been lost.

Despite a defence budget that is one of the lowest in the world, the missions and deployments have continued, and the remaining ranks stretched to breaking point. These strains have been particularly felt in the smaller corps such as the Naval Service, Air Corps, Communications Information Systems (CIS), Ordnance, and Medical who continue to struggle to meet daily operational requirements at home, while continuing to support overseas deployments.

From a 1999 establishment of 10,500 (plus 500 in training) Permanent Defence Force (PDF) and 12,500 Reserve Defence Force (RDF), the Defence Forces numbers have greatly been reduced. The PDF have struggled to maintain a strength of 8,500, while the RDF has a headcount substantially below establishment.

In recent years the deficiencies in the Defence Forces have come to the fore. The State has had to request **foreign naval vessels to patrol Irish waters due to shortages in the Naval Service**. Extraction missions have relied on foreign assistance, highlighting Ireland's lack of strategic lift.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the States inability to call on the Defence Forces or Civil Defence to support such a crisis on a significant scale. The HSE cyber-attack demonstrated the effects of cutting back on the Defence Forces CIS Corps, while military manoeuvres off the Irish coast in recent times have shone a light on the Defence Forces inability to effectively monitor what was going on in Ireland's waters or air space.

Serving and retired personnel are disgruntled, demoralised and finding difficulty combating the rising cost of living. This is unacceptable on many levels. Without a respected, robust and adequately-funded Defence Forces, Ireland's ability to defend and secure its economic, political and social freedoms is greatly reduced.

Compared to countries with a similar standard of living, Irish enlisted personnel receive disproportionately low pay. Current enlisted pay, especially at entry, does not make for a sustainable career. **A full review of pay conditions in the PDF, RDF and civilian employees with a view to adjusting to international best practice is required.**

Many of the Defence Forces' current problems could be fixed or ameliorated in a reasonably short period of time. However, necessary upgrades to barracks and facilities, and improvements to capabilities, will require significant investment to bring the Defence Forces to a sustainable operational level.

Recommendations:

- **Increase the budget for the Defence Forces**, within the re-established Department of National Defence, Security and Emergency Planning budget, to a level that would allow the Defence Forces to fulfil the roles required of them, as broadly laid out in this document.

- Ensure an adequate budget for the Department of National Defence, Security and Emergency Planning, to **cover all elements managed within the department**, including military defence, cybersecurity, emergency planning, and humanitarian commitments. This needs to increase notably from current levels.
- Use the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces as a steering document for the Defence Forces, but only with full consultation with the Department and the Defence Forces themselves.
- Examine the role and services provided by the Defence Forces through Service Level Agreements in order to improve efficiency of service delivery and avoid duplication.
- Recruit a civilian support staff to ameliorate the strains on operational units, and explore areas where civilian support staff can fulfil roles.
- Set, as a minimum, a **PDF establishment of 11,500 (plus 500 in training)** and an **RDF personnel target of 4,500**, with an **increase to Naval Service and Air Corps** strength as outlined in the latest strategic documents.
- Adopt a more flexible command structure on an operational and/or a geographical basis.
- Reintroduce a dedicated air defence and surveillance unit.
- Explore options for a **technical, specialist, and or staff rank** structure to facilitate faster promotion for skilled enlisted personnel.
- Aim to reach an RDF establishment of 7,500, and an expansion of the Naval Service Reserve, and create an Air Corps Reserve.
- Within the RDF create an active reserve of former PDF personnel and fully trained reserve specialists that can be called upon when required. More needs to be done to utilise reservists' skills.
- Create a **Defence Forces History and Heritage Board**, with military and civilian staff and volunteers dedicated to supporting and fostering the heritage of the organisation through museums, research and publication.
- Create policies around **inclusion retention and inclusion recruitment** so that injured personnel with life-long disabilities or illnesses can be retained in uniform, after assessment, in non-combat/operational roles without prejudice, and that disabled persons can serve, or continue to serve, their country after assessment in roles suitable to them.

Staff Retention & Career Progression

The Defence Forces organisation is uniquely diverse in terms of its personnel's skillsets, positions and ranks. While new practices, technologies and skillsets have been embraced, rank, pay and promotion do not always evolve at the same pace. **It is important that the rank and promotion system evolve to ensure best practices, foster leadership and synergy, and encourage retention.**

Due to the Defence Forces' relatively small size, promotion opportunities can be slow to materialise. This is especially amplified in the smaller corps and can cause frustration for personnel. The current system, with its linear rank structure, has led to the organisation losing many personnel with specialist skillsets who see no opportunity for career progression. All efforts should be made to embrace a more flexible system that rewards and empowers personnel and encourages retention. **This may require modification of the existing rank structure, and/or utilisation of the reserve and civilian vacancies.**

A fair and transparent system that provides career progression opportunities aside from promotions can lead to greater retention of skills and experience, **with enhanced innovation a likely result.** To further increase a linear skills base throughout the organisation there should be a significant increase in opportunity for senior NCOs for progression into the officer grades, with no barriers to achieving the most senior positions.

Recommendations:

- Use the Commission on the Defence Forces' Report to review and help steer the future of the organisation's promotion and rank system.
- Explore options for a **warrant, technical or staff rank system** to be introduced.
- **Recognise accredited qualifications achieved by personnel in their own time.**
- **Review the potential officer system** to encourage more enlisted personnel to apply and allow successful applicants to achieve the highest rank in the organisation.
- Broaden the manner in which reservists can take up positions on full time PDF courses, going beyond entry on a module basis.

Supporting the Military Community

Personnel, Veterans, and their Families

As previously noted, Irish Defence Forces personnel have given unbroken service to the State, securing peace and stability at home and abroad. The state's support and commitment to them should extend to ensuring that our Veterans and their Families receive the support they deserve.

Military service is diverse. Each branch and corps put different demands and strains on its personnel. Training, operations, and deployments can be both physically and mentally demanding. Defence Forces personnel can spend long periods of time away from their families, at times with very limited contact.

Family support is crucial for the functioning of the Defence Forces. The demanding nature of military service often results in **permanent physical or mental injuries to personnel**, impacting both the **individuals and their families**.

Recognising this, the State **must uphold a lifelong commitment to support not only those who serve but also their families**, reflecting an appropriate appreciation for their sacrifices.

National Defence Forces' Pledge

The Social Democrats in Government would introduce a National Defence Forces' Pledge.

This would be a comprehensive, whole-of-government commitment to respect and support current and former Defence Forces personnel and their families. It will require increasing the quality and scope of existing personnel services to include their families.

There are an estimated 140,000 former members of the Defence Forces, the majority of whom still live in Ireland. Aside from the many who leave service with lifelong physical and mental health issues, others struggle to find work, or find it difficult to reintegrate into the community.

While numerous national veterans' charities and regimental associations offer support, the Social Democrats commit to enhancing government support for

these organisations, ensuring they receive the resources necessary to help our veterans reintegrate into the community and find meaningful employment.

The Pledge should also extend to providing career advice, community integration, housing assistance, mental and physical health supports and funding for education or retraining.

To ensure no veteran is left behind, we will establish a **Veterans' Commissioner and Office of Veterans Affairs**. This initiative will centralise and streamline support services for veterans, fostering a coherent and coordinated approach to veteran care across all levels of government.

Government must also do more to foster pride and respect for our Defence Forces and in the long history of distinguished service of its personnel. We will institutionalise the **annual commemoration of the founding of Óglaigh na hÉireann each October 1st**, as a mark of gratitude for the organisation and its personnel. The recent 100th anniversary in 2024 should have been a significant event, celebrating not only the history but also the contributions of our veterans, aligning with international commemorations such as the International Day of UN Peacekeepers on May 29th and was a missed opportunity for the government.

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