

Public
Service Pay
Commission

Engage to Change Study

A collaborative study on
recruitment and retention
with personnel in the
Defence Forces.



Summary report of the findings from Module 3

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Aim and objectives of the study

The overall aim of the study is:

To carry out a nationally representative study on recruitment and retention of personnel within the Defence Forces.

The key objectives of this study are to:

1. describe key issues arising in respect of recruitment and retention among personnel within the Defence Forces
2. take account of the wide range of potential drivers that influence recruitment and retention across a range of characteristics
3. provide a report to the Public Service Pay Commission (PSPC) on key findings emerging from the study to assist in the identification of salient policy options to address any identified recruitment and/or retention difficulties for these personnel.

Methodology

This study uses both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) methods. In all, questionnaire responses were analysed from 1,986 individuals, giving a response rate of 26.6%ⁱ. Sampling weights (computed on the basis of grade/rank and whether the person was in the army, naval service or air corps) were applied to the survey data to provide nationally representative estimates.

Individuals from each of these groups took part in in-depth interviews; in total, 139 personnel took part in individual and focus group interviews with 42 officers, 58 non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and 39 privates.

The online survey questionnaires were divided into five sections:

- about your job
- about your recruitment (for respondents recruited within the past two years)
- about your workplace
- job intentions
- about you.

Each of the questionnaires contained sets of inter-related questions and these were used to form themed index scores. These scores are expressed as percentages. In most cases, a higher score reflects more favourable views. However, for some of the indexes, such as burnout, a higher score reflects less favourable views.

The effort–reward ratio is unique in that it is a ratio of two indexes, effort divided by reward. In this way, a ratio of 1.0 indicates that effort put in is equivalent to reward received, a ratio above 1.0 indicates that effort exceeds reward, and a ratio below 1.0 indicates that reward exceeds effort.

ⁱ The overall response rate for officers was 47.1% (army officers: 46.8%; naval service officers: 46.1% and air corps: 60.9%). The overall response rate for NCOs was 34.7% (army NCOs: 35.2%; naval service NCOs: 25.5% and air corps: 44.9%). The overall response rate for privates was 16.7% (army privates: 16.1%; naval service privates: 15.4% and air corps: 46.6%). This gives an overall 26.1% response from the Army; 24.2% from naval services and 46.8% from the air corps.

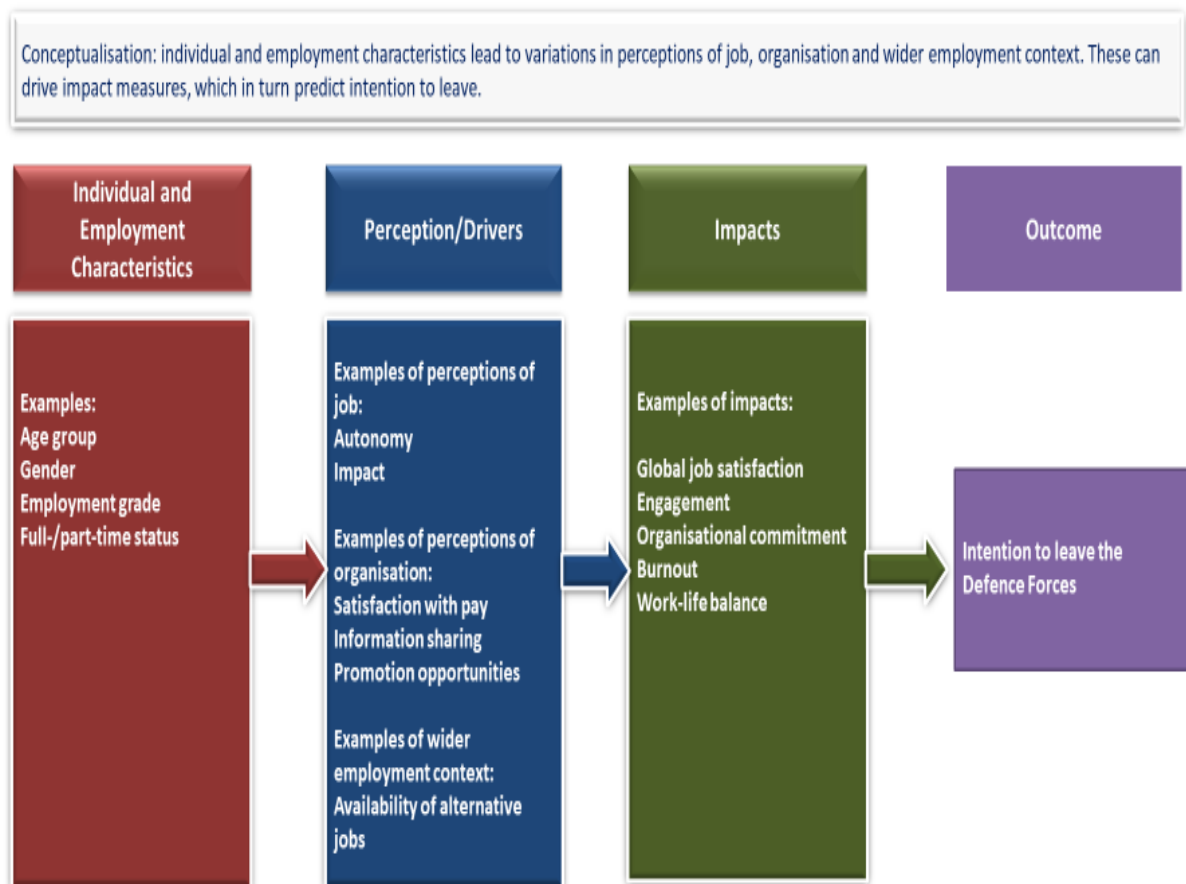
Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework for the study. Measures are categorised into individual and employment characteristics; perceptions of the job, the organisation and the wider employment context; and impacts.

- **Individual and employment characteristics** capture demographic information (e.g. age, gender, highest level of qualification) and employment information (e.g. employment grade, area of work, year of entry to the Defence Forces).
- **Perceptions** of job, organisation and wider employment context capture respondents' perceptions of various aspects of their work, job and wider employment conditions (e.g. autonomy, impact, satisfaction with pay, perceptions of co-workers and of manager support, job alternatives). These in turn may 'drive' impacts.
- **Impacts** are more global indicators of the quality of respondents' working lives. These include global job satisfaction, burnout and organisational commitment.
- **Outcomes** measure turnover intent (i.e. intention to leave the Defence Forces).

The theoretical framework underpinning the study is that:

Individual and employment characteristics lead to variations in perceptions of the job and the organisation. These can drive impact measures, which in turn predict intention to leave.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the study



Limitations

All research has limitations. An online survey is both efficient and convenient. It allows a short time frame for data collection and it enables a substantial amount of information to be collected and easily prepared for analysis. However, the complex contexts in which recruitment and retention issues arise cannot be fully captured by survey data. This limitation was offset by (1) including some open-ended questions in the survey and (2) conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with respondents working in a variety of roles.

The response rate, 26.6%, is lower than desired. However, as noted earlier, the data have been weighted to provide nationally representative estimates, on the basis of the characteristics used to compute the sampling weights. Comparisons of the weighted sample with the population indicate a good match in terms of area of service (army, naval service or air corps) and rank (officer, NCO or private).

In addition to the limitations of the sample characteristics noted above, we have no way of empirically assessing the extent to which particularly enthusiastic or particularly dissatisfied individuals responded, and this potential bias should be borne in mind when interpreting the results.

Finally, causality cannot be inferred from the survey results (as with any cross-sectional design). The results demonstrate associations and relationships but should not be used to conclude that characteristic X causes outcome Y.

The findings from the qualitative and quantitative parts of this study complement each other and show a strong correspondence with the issues arising, which serves to strengthen the findings. As with all interview-based qualitative studies, however, the findings are based on opinion and perceptions and these may not always accurately reflect the situation.

Results from the analysis

The following sections present the findings for all respondents, with certain comparisons between categories of respondents also noted where available.

Intention to stay or leave

Percentages intending to stay in or leave the Defence Forces

Respondents were asked whether they intended to stay in or leave the Defence Forces over the next two years. In order to form two groups (stay or leave) for later analysis, 'definitely leave' and 'probably leave' were recoded as 'leave', and 'definitely stay' and 'probably stay' were recoded as 'stay'.

58% of personnel expressed an intention to leave the Defence Forces in the next two years

Relevance of factors for intending to stay or leave the Defence Forces

Respondents who expressed an intention to stay in the Defence Forces were asked to indicate the relevance of a range of factors to this intention. The three most relevant reasons (i.e. with the highest frequencies of 'highly relevant' ratings) were

- personal or family reasons (37%),
- pension eligibility (35%), and
- suitable working hours (31%).

Respondents who expressed an intention to leave the Defence Forces were asked to indicate the relevance of a range of factors to this intention. The three most relevant reasons (i.e. with the highest frequencies of 'highly relevant' ratings) were

- pay (84.5%),
- staffing levels a problem (74%), and
- better job opportunities elsewhere (60%).

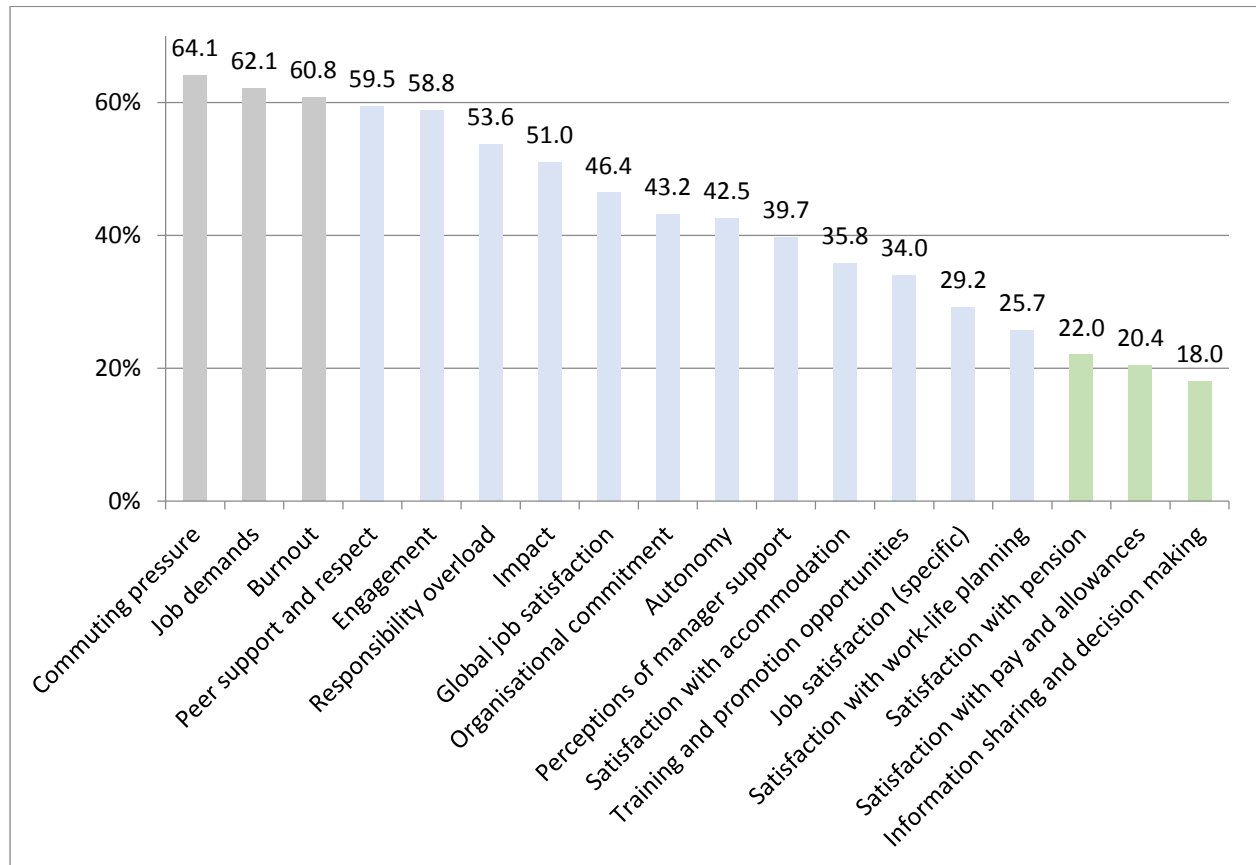
It is of note that the fourth most common reason for intending to leave related to job opportunities being too limited by the time respondents would qualify for a pension (47%).

Perceptions of job and of organisation

The overall profile of individuals working in the Defence Forces indicates that these individuals report having good job alternatives, are moderately engaged in their work, put in high effort, experience moderate to high levels of peer support and respect, and believe their work has a positive impact. However, there are high levels of commuting pressure, job demands and burnout. In addition, there is widespread dissatisfaction with information sharing and decision making, pay and allowances and pension.

Figure 2 presents the means for all respondents on 18 index measures, that were included in the survey. It is noted that the three highest scores (commuting pressure, job demands and burnout) all relate to negative issues.

Figure 2: Index scores (perceptions of job and of organisation) for personnel in the Defence Forcesⁱⁱ



- Effort–reward ratio is an additional measure that is not included in Figure 2 since it is based on a different metric to the 0–100% scale of the indexes: respondents had a mean effort–reward ratio of 1.80, meaning that they put in 1.8 times more effort than the reward received for their work.
- A number of these measures vary significantly by area of service, grade/rank and year of entering the Defence Forces. See the Data Appendix for the detailed results.

Job alternatives

This index measures the perceived availability of alternative employment and while this issue is beyond the control of the organisation, the findings suggest that it is likely to strengthen peoples' intentions to leave.

The overall mean on the job alternatives index is 70.2%, indicating that perceptions of availability of alternative employment are high. Almost four in every five respondents indicated that they could easily find another job outside the Defence Forces (78%) and knew of several job alternatives for which they could apply (78%).

ⁱⁱ Job satisfaction (specific) refers to the level of satisfaction with specific aspects of the job such as personal / major equipment, systems and infrastructure.

- The job alternatives index scores vary significantly by area of service: air corps personnel (76.7%) have a significantly higher job alternatives score than those in the army (69.6%) and naval service (72.6%).
- The job alternatives index scores also vary significantly by grade/rank: officers (65.5%) have a significantly lower job alternatives index score than NCOs (69.9%) and privates (71.5%).
- Respondents who entered the Defence Forces in 1994 or earlier (65.3%) have significantly lower job alternatives index scores compared with those who entered between 1995 and 2004 (72.9%), between 2005 and 2012 (70.0%), and between 2013 and 2019 (70.8%).

Intention to leave the Defence Forces

This index measures the level of intent expressed by respondents to leave their job in the Defence Forces. It is a combination of five items. The first asked about the frequency with which respondents thought about leaving the Defence Forces; the second and third asked about the likelihood that respondents would leave the Defence Forces and search for a job in another organisation, respectively. These items account for one third of the overall scale. The fourth asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with statements regarding whether or not they had job offers in hand and this item accounts for a further one third of the scale. The final item asked respondents whether they intended to stay in or leave the Defence Forces in the next two years and this item accounts for the final one third of the scale. The index was computed in a method similar to all other indexes in this report (i.e. responses were combined to form a scale ranging from 0% to 100%).

- The mean intention to leave index score (based on a combination of five items) is 55.4%, indicating moderate intention to leave the Defence Forces.
- The intention to leave index scores do not vary significantly by area of service (army, naval service or air corps).
- NCOs (56.5%) and privates (57.8%) have significantly higher intention to leave scores than officers (42.6%).
- The intention to leave index scores do not vary significantly by year of entry to the Defence Forces.

The analysis of intercorrelations between index scoresⁱⁱⁱ found that intention to leave index scores were most strongly related to:

- job alternatives (.545)
- job satisfaction (global) (-.451)
- burnout (.417)
- job expectations (-.400)^{iv}
- organisational commitment (-.397).

(For further detail, see the Data Appendix, which shows intercorrelations between all index scores.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Please note that a high and positive score indicates that the factor increases intention to leave, whereas a high and negative score indicates that the factor decreases intention to leave.

^{iv} This index refers only to those respondents who had been in their current role for two years or less and include those who joined the Defence Forces within the previous two years as well as those who were promoted or moved into new roles.

Recruitment issues in the Defence Forces

Two out of five respondents (38.9%) had been in their current job for two years or less. This cohort responded to questions about the recruitment process and their job expectations.

- The survey dealt with recruitment experiences for those who had moved to their current job within the last two years, irrespective of when they had entered the Defence Forces.
- The overall score on the recruitment process index is 43.5%, indicating a low to moderate level of satisfaction. Almost half of respondents, for example, were dissatisfied with the information provided about the job (49%) and a similar proportion with the length of the overall recruitment process (47%).
- The recruitment process scores do not vary significantly by area of service (army, naval service or air corps). However, NCOs (38.5%) and privates (42.4%) have significantly lower recruitment process scores than officers (53.3%). There is no significant difference by year of entry to the Defence Forces.
- The overall score on the job expectations index is 39%, indicating a low level of match between prior expectations and subsequent experience. For example, while 41% reported that their job responsibilities matched their expectations, only 27% of respondents felt that the job met their original expectations.
- The job expectations scores do not vary significantly by area of service (army, naval service or air corps). However, NCOs (40.4%) and privates (29.0%) have significantly lower job expectations scores than officers (55.4%).
- There is also a significant difference between those who joined the Defence Forces in 2004 or earlier and those who joined during or after 2005, with those joining after 2005 having lower job expectation scores (1994 or earlier: 48.5%; 1995–2004: 44.6%; 2005–2012: 38.3%; 2013–2019: 28.7%).

Issues arising in the interviews deal almost exclusively with the recruitment process into the Defence Forces rather than internal moves within the organisation. While it was noted that a high number of personnel in the Defence Forces had a family connection to the services prior to joining, many noted they would not recommend the career to members of their own family. The recruitment process was identified as relatively straight-forward and includes six steps (complete personal details online, do a psychometric test online, get called for interview, undertake a physical fitness test, have a medical and undertake recruit training). Four main issues were identified as problematic: (1) the level of attrition throughout the process, (2) the low numbers being recruited, (3) the quality of personnel being recruited, and (4) the length of time taken for new personnel to begin to make a contribution.

Regression analysis of perceptions and impacts

Table 1 presents a regression analysis of perceptions and impacts for the combined sample and by rank.

Table 1 Summary table of regressions of perceptions and impacts measures on intention to leave among combined group, officers, NCOs and privates

PERCEPTIONS OF JOB AND ORGANISATION			
Combined (r-square = .405)	Officers (r-square = .289)	NCOs (r-square = .302)	Privates (r-square = .446)
Higher job alternatives ^v	Higher job alternatives	Higher job alternatives	Higher job alternatives
Fewer training and promotion opportunities	Higher commuting pressure	Higher commuting pressure	Fewer training and promotion opportunities
More commuting pressure	Lower perceptions of manager support	Lower training and promotion opportunities	Higher commuting pressure
Lower perceptions of manager support	Lower satisfaction with pay and allowances	Lower levels of job responsibility overload	Lower satisfaction with pay and allowances
Higher job demands			Lower perceptions of manager support
Lower satisfaction with pay and allowances			Lower perceived impact
Lower satisfaction with accommodation			Higher levels of demands
IMPACTS			
Combined (r-square = .303)	Officers (r-square = .248)	NCOs (r-square = .233)	Privates (r-square = .305)
Lower job satisfaction (global)	Lower job satisfaction (global)	Lower job satisfaction (global)	Lower job satisfaction (global)
Higher burnout	Higher effort–reward ratio	Higher effort–reward ratio	Higher effort–reward ratio
Higher effort–reward ratio	Lower organisational commitment	Lower organisational commitment	Lower organisational commitment
Lower organisational commitment	Lower work–life planning	Lower work–life planning	Lower work–life planning
Lower work–life planning		Higher burnout	Higher burnout
		Lower job satisfaction (specific)	

^v It is noted that while perceptions of high levels of available job opportunities is beyond the control of the organisation, the findings suggest that these perceptions strengthen peoples' intentions to leave.

Key findings and conclusions: Officers

Findings from quantitative and qualitative data identified a number of issues relevant to career and job intentions. The overall response rate to the survey for officers (n = 242) was 47.1% (army officers: 46.8%; naval service officers: 46.1% and air corps officers: 60.9%). In total, 42 officers took part in focus group (n =27) or individual interviews (n =15).

34.1% of officers expressed an intention to leave the Defence Forces

Relevance of factors for intending to stay in or leave the Defence Forces

Officer respondents who expressed an intention to stay in the Defence Forces were asked to indicate the relevance of a range of factors to this intention. The three most relevant reasons (i.e. with the highest frequencies of 'highly relevant' ratings) to stay in the Defence Forces were

- colleagues (40%),
- personal or family reasons (40%), and
- suitable working hours (33%).

Officer respondents who expressed an intention to leave the Defence Forces were asked to indicate the relevance of a range of factors to this intention. The three most relevant reasons (i.e. with the highest frequencies of 'highly relevant' ratings) for intending to leave the Defence Forces were

- staffing levels a problem (77%),
- pay (59%), and
- better job opportunities elsewhere (47%).

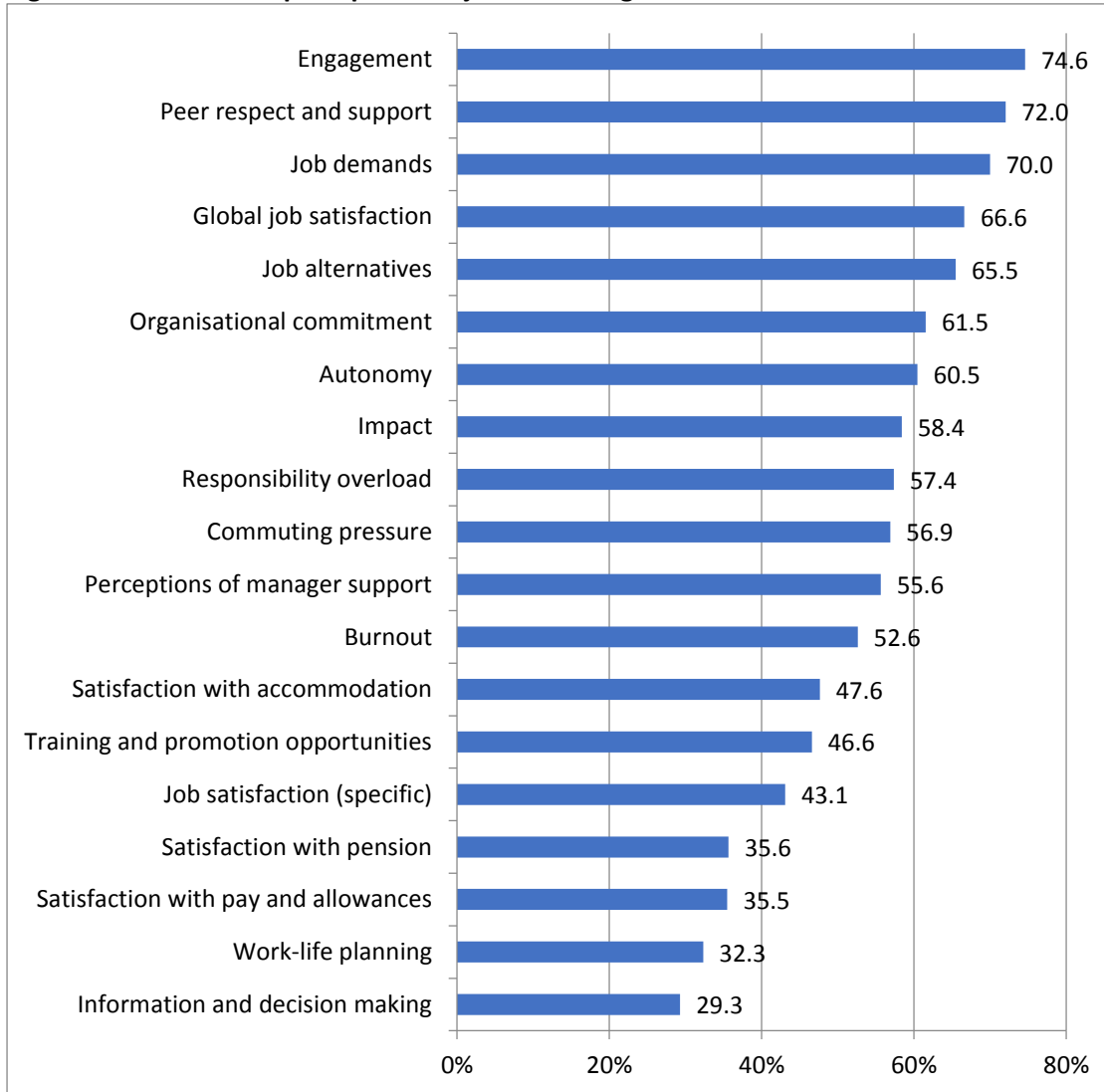
It is of note that the fourth most common reason related to job opportunities being too limited by the time respondents would qualify for pension (42%).

Perceptions of the job and the organisation: Officers

The overall profile of officers working in the Defence Forces indicates that these individuals report being very engaged in their work, experience high levels of peer support and respect, and have high levels of job satisfaction (global). However, there is widespread dissatisfaction among officers with their involvement in information sharing and decision making, the level of job demands and their ability to balance their work–life planning. A majority also report low levels of satisfaction with pay and pension.

Figure 3 presents the means for officers on the index measures that were included in the survey.

Figure 3: Index scores: perceptions of job and of organisation for officers in the Defence Forces



Effort–reward ratio is an additional measure that is not included in Figure 3 since it is based on a different metric to the 0–100% scale of the indexes. Officer respondents had a mean effort–reward ratio of 1.50, meaning that they put in 1.5 times more effort than the reward received for their work.

Summary of issues arising from interviews with officers

The findings arising from the interviews provide a more in-depth understanding of issues arising and while corresponding well with those issues identified in the survey also identify additional areas of challenge.

Positive issues arising

- Exciting and varied work
- Comaraderie
- Overseas experience
- Pride in serving the country
- Organisational support

Challenges relating to the job

- Workload and staffing
- Dysfunctional turnover
- Impact on enlisted and private ranks
- Work-life balance
- Challenges in managing workload
- Location uncertainty
- Commuting
- Duties overseas
- Being in the Naval service
- Challenges for more junior ranks
- Family-friendly policies
- Impact on health and wellbeing

Challenges relating to the organisational context

- Pay and allowances
- Pension
- Voice in decision making
- Accommodation

Conclusions relating to Officers

The following conclusions draw on the findings arising from the quantitative and qualitative data.

Positive aspects of the work and the organisation

Findings arising from both qualitative and quantitative data highlighted positive aspects of working in the Defence Forces.

Areas identified included the exciting and varied nature of the work, the camaraderie, being able to gain experience, having pride in serving one's country and organisational support. The three most relevant reasons identified by those intending to stay in the Defence Forces were identified as colleagues (40%), personal or family reasons (40%) and suitable working hours/day/rota (33%).

Excessive workload and inadequate staffing levels

Officers reported having an excessive workload, and it was highlighted that the situation is considerably worse now than previously.

More than one in four of those intending to leave their job identified the most relevant factor as 'staffing levels are a problem' (77%). A higher effort–reward ratio was found to predict intention to leave in the regression model.

It was reported that 'dysfunctional turnover', particularly the loss of experienced personnel, has had a number of negative consequences. These include officers double, triple and quadruple jobbing; inability to perform to the standard required; challenges in supporting enlisted personnel; having too much responsibility; challenges in implementing day-to-day operations; personnel being promoted too soon; poorer relationships with peers and with junior and senior ranks; a lowering of morale; and an increase in risks arising.

Dissatisfaction with work–life balance and planning

Working in the Defence Forces has a negative impact on work–life balance for officers and their families due to challenges relating to managing their workload, location uncertainty, commuting and the requirement to go overseas.

The findings from the work–life planning index highlight widespread dissatisfaction with this area, and at 32% it was the third-lowest-scoring index reported for officers in this study. Lower work–life planning was identified as a significant predictor of intention to leave. Trying to manage work–life balance in the context of excessive workloads was highlighted, and many officers spoke about always being on call, taking their work home, negative impacts on their health and wellbeing, and poor work–life balance.

Location uncertainty

Location uncertainty, particularly following overseas duties or promotions, is a key source of concern for officers.

While there were positive aspects associated with overseas duties and gaining promotions, a significant challenge relating to both is the impact on officers' location following assignment. Two issues arise: (1) significant uncertainty about where an officer will be placed, particularly following an overseas assignment, which is a source of stress, particularly where the officer has a family; and (2) assignment to a new location can result in the officer living away from their family during the week or having a long commute from home to workplace. The commuting pressure index shows moderately high levels of dissatisfaction with this area (57%), and commuting pressure was also identified as a significant predictor of intention to leave. Officers spoke about the very negative impact of this area on their family life.

During interviews, location uncertainty was the single most common issue raised by officers in respect of career progression and some officers identified this as a key barrier to promotion.

Dissatisfaction with pay, allowances and pensions

There is widespread dissatisfaction with pay, allowances and pensions, and this finding is strongly reflected in both the quantitative and the qualitative findings.

The pay and allowances index had the fourth lowest mean index score (35%) of all indexes included in the study, and satisfaction with pension (36%) had the fifth lowest score.

Some officers were concerned about their overall pay level being lower than in the past, and low satisfaction with this area was significantly related to intention to leave. Changes in pension entitlements in the new contract introduced in 2013 were identified as 'an absolute disaster for the Defence Forces' and it was suggested that the mandatory age for leaving the Defence Forces had a negative impact on retention.

This job alternatives index measures the perceived availability of alternative employment and while this issue is beyond the control of the organisation, the findings suggest that it is likely to strengthen peoples' intentions to leave. The mean index score for officers regarding perceptions of job alternatives was 65.5% and this was lower than NCOs or privates.

It was also suggested that the transferability of skills to alternative employment outside the Defence Forces would depend on the area worked in while a Defence Force member.

Concerns about enlisted personnel

While officers raised a number of concerns about their own work and organisational context, many were more concerned about the situation for enlisted personnel.

The main concerns about the terms and conditions for enlisted personnel raised in interviews focused on pay and allowances, and particular attention was drawn to pay relating to duties (e.g. security duty and weekend duty) and take-home pay, both of which were reported to be considerably worse now than in the past.

Changes to pension entitlements for enlisted personnel were identified as having a very negative impact on retention, and recent changes in this area were directly linked with experienced personnel leaving the Defence Forces.

The third area identified as problematic for enlisted personnel was poor access to, and a poor standard of, accommodation. It was suggested that this creates significant challenges.

Low levels of satisfaction with information sharing and decision making

There are low levels of satisfaction with information sharing and decision making.

This information and decision making index had the lowest mean index score for officers, at 29%. The findings from the qualitative data highlighted issues arising in a number of areas, including not being directly involved in pay negotiations, not being able to strike, always agreeing to take on work, and having little choice about location or type of work.

Differences between army, naval service and air corps

There was no variation across the army, naval service or air corps in the regression analysis of officers' intention to leave. However, findings from the qualitative data suggest some differences of importance.

Work-life balance is more problematic for those in the naval service than for those in other areas because of the requirement to rotate to sea every two years. While this is challenging for all personnel, it is more difficult for those who commute long distances.

Officers working in the air corps reported having fewer promotional opportunities than those assigned to the naval service or army. However, work-life balance was reported to be more positive because of a lower requirement to do overseas duties and because of location certainty.

Key findings and conclusions: NCOs

Findings from quantitative and qualitative data identified a number of issues relevant to career and job intentions. The overall response rate to the survey for NCOs (n = 689) was 34.7% (army NCOs: 35.2%; naval service NCOs: 25.5% and air corps: 44.9%). In total, 58 NCOs took part in focus group (n =30) or individual interviews (n =28).

61.4% of NCOs expressed an intention to leave the Defence Forces

Relevance of factors for intending to stay in or leave the Defence Forces

NCO respondents who expressed an intention to stay in the Defence Forces were asked to indicate the relevance of a range of factors to this intention. The three most relevant reasons (i.e. with the highest frequencies of 'highly relevant' ratings) were

- pension eligibility (46%),
- personal or family reasons (37%), and
- suitable working hours (34%).

NCO respondents who expressed an intention to leave the Defence Forces were asked to indicate the relevance of a range of factors to this intention. The three most relevant reasons (i.e. with the highest frequencies of 'highly relevant' ratings) were

- pay (87%),
- staffing levels a problem (81%), and
- better job opportunities elsewhere (55%).

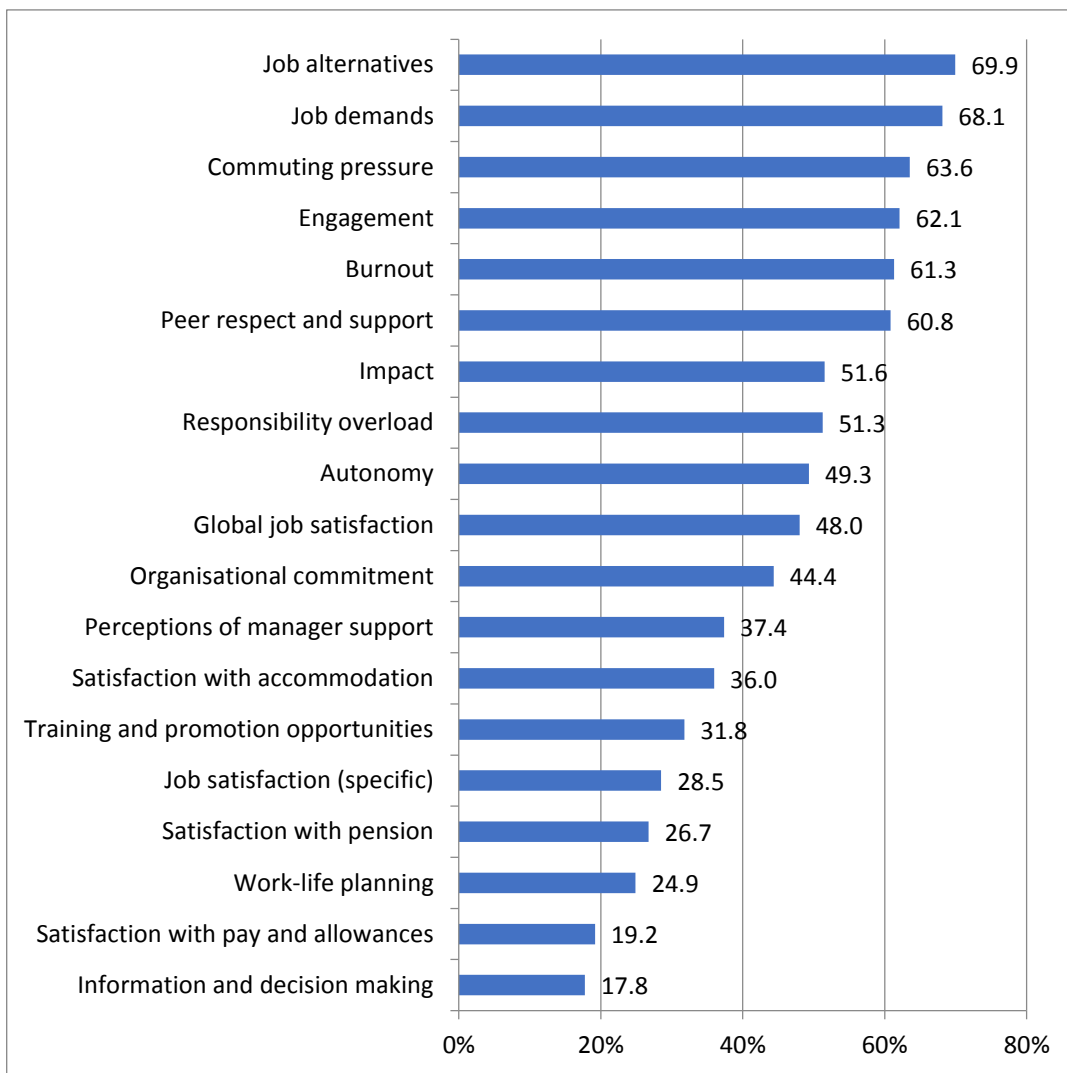
Perceptions of the job and the organisation

The overall profile of NCOs working in the Defence Forces indicates that these individuals report having very good job alternatives, are moderately engaged in their work, and experience moderate levels of peer support and respect. However, there is widespread dissatisfaction with involvement in information sharing and decision making, pay and allowances, work–life planning and pensions. These individuals also report low levels of training and promotion opportunities, high levels of job demands, and low levels of job satisfaction (specific). A majority of these individuals are dissatisfied with accommodation and experience commuting pressures.

Figure 4 presents the means for NCOs on the index measures that were included in the survey. All indexes are expressed as percentages (see Section 2: Methodology for more information), and while higher scores generally indicate more positive outcomes, it should be noted that there are four 'negative' scales – responsibility overload, burnout, job demands and commuting pressure. The three indexes with the highest scores are job alternatives (69.9%), job demands (68.1%), and commuting pressure (63.6%).

Three of the indexes have very low scores: information sharing and decision making (17.8%), satisfaction with pay and allowances (19.2%), and satisfaction with work–life planning (24.9%).

Figure 4: Index scores: perceptions of job and of organisation for NCOs in the Defence Forces



Effort–reward ratio is an additional measure that is not included in Figure 4 since it is based on a different metric to the 0–100% scale of the indexes. NCO respondents had a mean effort–reward ratio of 1.88, meaning that they put in almost 1.9 times more effort than the reward received for their work.

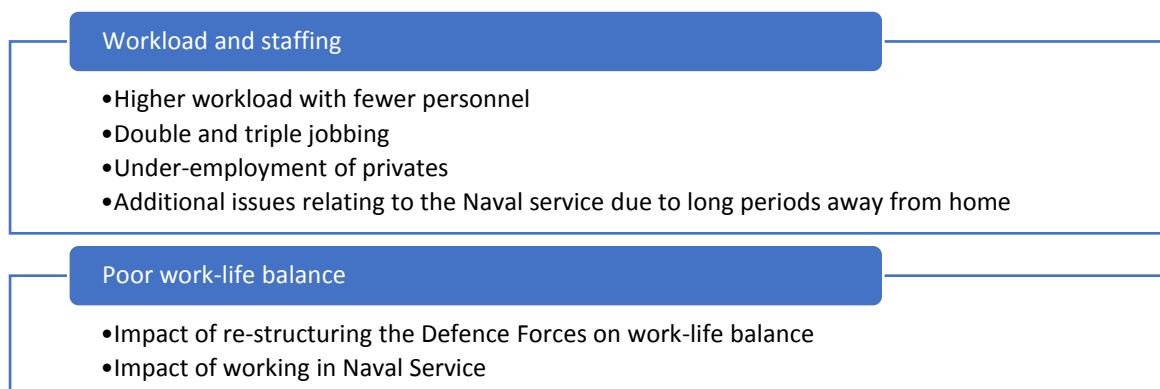
Summary of issues arising from interviews with NCOs

The findings arising from the interviews provide a more in-depth understanding of issues arising and while corresponding well with those issues identified in the survey also identify additional areas of challenge.

Positive aspects



Challenges relating to the Job



Challenges relating to the organisation

Pay and conditions

- Decreases in take-home pay; Low remuneration for 24 hour duties and other allowances poorly paid; Challenges in pay and conditions for recruits and privates; Poorer pension entitlement for people recruited more recently

Impact of pay, allowances and new contract on retention

- Unable to afford rent or mortgage; Can find better-paid alternatives elsewhere; Unable to fund family life; Having a second job; Uncertain future

Accommodation

- General conditions in some locations poor; Availability limited; Inequity within the Defence Forces between ranks; Shared sleeping arrangements

Poor facilities

- Reports and improvements of facilities; Gym and training facilities - Naval Service challenging because of limited equipment and space

Equipment outdated and limited

Career progression

- Having to move units to get points; Personnel with limited experience in area being promoted; Location uncertainty on promotion; Not enough vacancies; Loyalty compromised; Personnel in air corps are disadvantaged because of limited overseas opportunities.

Management and leadership

- Line management - findings generally positive but need to say 'no' more often to additional work and need for better HR policies; Officers noted to have better conditions for officers and there are insufficient opportunities for NCOs to become officers.

Education and training

- Limited access to courses
- Limited transferability of qualifications

Conclusions relating to NCOs

The following conclusions draw on the findings arising from the quantitative and qualitative data.

Positive aspects of the work and the organisation

NCOs are engaged with their work (mean index score: 62%) and enjoy moderate levels of peer support and respect (mean index score: 61%).

A small number of comments highlighted positive aspects of working as an NCO in the Defence Forces; of these, having a pension after 21 years emerged most commonly and most strongly. Other reasons for remaining in the Defence Forces included the type and variety of the work, having pride in being a member of the Defence Forces, having good camaraderie, receiving an income, and having opportunities for education, training and travelling overseas.

Dissatisfaction with pay and allowances

The single overwhelming reason given by NCOs for leaving the Defence Forces was pay and conditions, and this is strongly reflected in both the quantitative and the qualitative data. The commentary around these areas far exceeded the commentary on any other issue.

The pay and allowances index had the second lowest mean score (19%) of all indexes included in the study, and almost nine in every ten NCOs (87%) who indicated an intention to leave identified pay as a reason to do so.

Many concerns were raised about low levels of overall pay and allowances, particularly that provided for 24-hour duties. Many NCOs expressed frustration and a sense of unfairness regarding the reduced pay imposed following the financial crisis. Sometimes these feelings were expressed as anger. The consequences for NCOs (who also raised concerns about privates) of the current levels of pay were identified as not being able to afford rent or a mortgage, not being able to provide basics for their families, having to hold a second job and having an uncertain future.

Many better-paid job alternatives were identified in interviews with NCOs, and the mean index score for job alternatives (70%) was the highest of all the mean scores for indexes among this group.

Dissatisfaction with pension entitlements

There is widespread dissatisfaction with the pension entitlements for personnel under the new contracts.

Changes that have taken place in relation to pension entitlements were identified as particularly problematic because entitlement to a full pension does not arise until after 30 years. At this stage, it was suggested, it is too late for a person to start a new career, and family expenses may also be particularly high at this stage. This is reflected in the satisfaction with pension index, where the score was the fourth lowest (27%) of all the index scores for this group. There was substantial commentary about the revised pension arrangements, and 40% of respondents identified job opportunities being too limited by the time their pension would be paid as a reason for leaving. Pension eligibility was also reflected in reasons to stay; 46% of NCOs reported this factor as a reason to stay. Findings from the qualitative data suggest that these personnel are likely to be in receipt of a pension after 21 years.

Excessive workload and low staffing levels

Excessive workload and low staffing levels were identified as a challenge for NCOs and 81% identified 'staffing levels a problem' as a reason to leave.

Burnout (which for this group had a mean index score of 61%) and higher effort–reward ratio (calculated to be 1.88, meaning that NCOs put in almost 1.9 times more effort than the reward received for their work) were both identified as significant predictors of intention to leave in the regression analysis.

Personnel spoke about having a higher workload in part because of there being fewer personnel than previously but also because of a culture of 'never saying no', and some NCOs noted that they were double or triple jobbing. Lower levels of job responsibility overload, however, were also identified as predictors of intention to leave, suggesting that a careful balance in respect of the level of responsibility, particularly where undertaking work ordinarily done by those at a higher rank, is required.

A small number of comments, however, highlighted the under-employment of privates.

Work-life imbalance

Working in the Defence Forces as an NCO has a negative impact on work-life balance. This is evidenced by the work-life planning index, which at 25% had the third lowest index score for NCOs.

Low levels of work-life planning were identified as a predictor of intention to leave in the regression analysis. The restructuring of the Defence Forces in 2012, which involved a reduction in the numbers of battalions and barracks, was identified as having had a detrimental impact on work-life balance.

Commuting also impacts on work-life balance and the need to commute is reflected in the findings regarding the commuting index. This index had a mean score of 64%, suggesting a moderate to high level of commuting pressure among NCOs. More commuting pressure was identified as a predictor of intention to leave in the regression analysis. In addition, 27% of those intending to leave the Defence Forces identified an inconvenient workplace location as a reason to leave.

Challenges with training and promotion opportunities

NCOs reported low levels of satisfaction with training and promotion opportunities and it was highlighted that this is particularly problematic due to the requirements of the new contract in place since 2013.

The mean index score for training and promotion opportunities was 32%, suggesting low levels of satisfaction with this aspect of the organisation. Additionally, fewer training and promotion opportunities were identified as a predictor of intention to leave in the regression analysis.

Most of the commentary relating to career progression focused on the consequences of having to attain a number of points for promotion, which, in turn, is a requirement to remain within the Defence Forces. Consequences of the system identified included having to move to different units to get points, individuals with limited experience in the specific area being promoted, location uncertainty on promotion, insufficient vacancies, and compromised loyalty to specific divisions and units.

Access to external courses, such as those available through Springboard and the Institute of Technology, Carlow, were welcomed. However, access to some courses was identified as limited, including those required for promotional purposes. A requirement to live away from home for some courses, including NCO courses, was also highlighted as challenging.

Challenges with accommodation

There are low levels of satisfaction with access to, and the standard of, accommodation available to NCOs.

The mean index score for satisfaction with accommodation was 36%, and a number of issues were identified as problematic. These were the generally poor condition of accommodation, limited availability, inequity within the Defence Forces in terms of access to and standard of accommodation between enlisted and officer ranks, poor facilities and shared sleeping accommodation. Of these, shared sleeping accommodation was highlighted as very problematic.

Challenges were also identified in terms of repairs being carried out in a timely manner due to the lack of local budgets and qualified personnel to undertake this work.

Challenges with information sharing and decision making

There is widespread dissatisfaction among NCOs with information sharing and decision making.

As was the case for the other ranks, the mean index score for information sharing and decision making (18%) was the lowest of all the index scores for NCOs. The qualitative data suggest this may be explained, in part, by NCOs feeling a lack of voice in decision making around pay, allowances and conditions.

The perceptions of manager support mean index score was low at 37%, although, in general, NCOs spoke positively about their line managers. Some attention was drawn to the differences in terms and conditions between enlisted and officer personnel.

Conclusions: army, naval service and air corps

There was no variation across the army, naval service and air corps in the regression analysis of intention to leave.

However, findings from interviews with NCOs suggest that those working in the naval service experience higher workloads and lower levels of work–life balance. Accommodation was also identified as particularly problematic in the naval service.

Key findings and conclusions: Privates

Findings from quantitative and qualitative data identified a number of issues relevant to career and job intentions. The overall response rate to the survey for privates (n = 1,056) was 16.7% (army privates: 16.1%; naval service privates: 15.4% and air corps privates: 46.6%). In total, 39 privates took part in focus group (n =26) or individual interviews (n =13).

61.1% of privates expressed an intention to leave the Defence Forces

Relevance of factors for intending to stay in or leave the Defence Forces

Respondents who expressed an intention to stay in the Defence Forces were asked to indicate the relevance of a range of factors to this intention. The four most relevant reasons (i.e. with the highest frequencies of 'highly relevant' ratings) were

- personal or family reasons (31%),
- suitable working hours/days/rota (23%),
- colleagues (23%), and
- pension eligibility (23%).

Respondents who expressed an intention to leave the Defence Forces were asked to indicate the relevance of a range of factors to this intention. The three most relevant reasons (i.e. with the highest frequencies of 'highly relevant' ratings) were

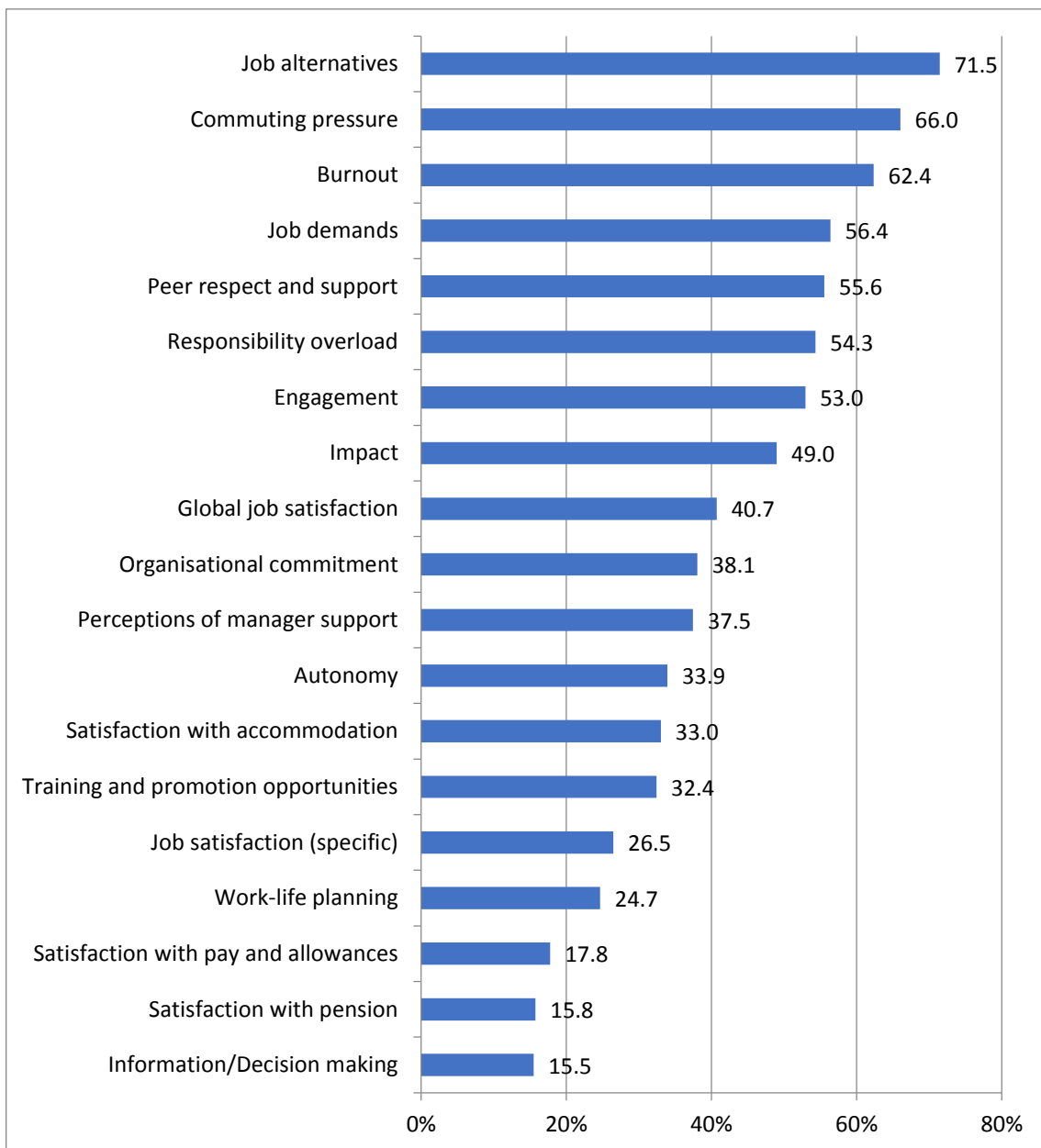
- pay (90%),
- better job opportunities elsewhere (70%) and
- staffing levels a problem (63%).

Perceptions of the job and the organisation

The overall profile of privates working in the Defence Forces indicates that these individuals report having very good job alternatives, high levels of commuting pressure and experience high levels of burnout. They experience moderate levels of peer respect and support, are moderately engaged in their work and report having a moderate impact. There is widespread dissatisfaction with pension, pay and allowances and with involvement in information sharing and decision making. A majority of privates are experiencing difficulties in work-life planning and report low levels of job satisfaction (specific).

Figure 5 presents the means for privates on the index measures that were included in the survey. All indexes are expressed as percentages, and while higher scores generally indicate more positive outcomes, it should be noted that there are four 'negative' scales – responsibility overload, burnout, job demands and commuting pressure. The indexes with the highest score is job alternatives (71.5%), commuting pressure (66.0%) and burnout (62.4%).

Figure 5: Index scores: perceptions of job and of organisation for privates in the Defence Forces



Effort–reward ratio is an additional measure that is not included in Figure 5 since it is based on a different metric to the 0–100% scale of the indexes. Privates had a mean effort–reward ratio of 1.82, meaning that they put in just over 1.8 times more effort than the reward received for their work.

Issues arising from interviews with privates

The findings arising from the interviews provide a more in-depth understanding of issues arising and while corresponding well with those issues identified in the survey also identify additional areas of challenge.

Positive issues arising

- Camaraderie
- Exciting and varied work
- Access to training and qualifications
- Access to healthcare
- Income security

A number of challenges were also identified by privates and these are now presented.

Challenges arising in respect of the job

Workload and staffing

- Duties (number of duties, short notice, cost of doing duties)
- Tiredness
- Overseas requirement
- Naval service

Work-life imbalance

Challenges arising in respect of the organisation

Pay, pension and new contracts

- Duty allowances poorly remunerated
- Impact of post-2008 financial crisis
- Better-paid alternatives available
- Emotional impact on privates and their families
- Financial impact on privates and their families
- Imbalance between payment received and the cost of coming to work
- Unable to afford housing
- Unable to afford commuting costs
- Having a second job

Accommodation

- Overall state
- Shared sleeping arrangements
- Naval Service accommodation
- Gym facilities
- Management of issues arising

Equipment

Management and leadership

- Not having a voice
- Officers vs privates

Support for mental health

Support for training and education

- Transferable qualifications
- Access to courses

Career progression

- Getting points
- Requirement for overseas experience
- Insufficient promotion opportunities
- Additional responsibility without adequate compensation
- Access to courses inequitable and limited
- Negative impact on family life

Conclusions relating to privates

The following conclusions draw on the findings arising from the quantitative and qualitative data.

Positive aspects of the work and the organisation

While a small number of positive aspects were identified, in general, the views and perceptions expressed by privates about working in the Defence Forces were negative.

A small number of issues were identified as positive, including camaraderie, the exciting and varied nature of the work, access to training and qualifications, access to healthcare and income security. In general, indexes relevant to these aspects showed low to moderate levels of satisfaction, as follows: peer support and respect (56%), engagement (53%), job satisfaction (global) (41%) and job satisfaction (specific) (26%).

Dissatisfaction with pay and allowances

There is widespread dissatisfaction, anger and resentment among privates regarding pay and allowances.

This conclusion is reflected in the index relating to pay and allowances (18%), which showed very low levels of satisfaction. Ninety percent of privates who expressed an intention to leave identified pay as a highly relevant reason for their intention, and this was followed by better opportunities elsewhere (70%). It was highlighted that there are many alternative opportunities available outside the Defence Forces where the pay would be better for similar types of work, and this is reflected in the mean index score for job alternatives (71.5%), which was higher than that of officers and NCOs. Lower satisfaction with pay and allowances and more job alternatives were both identified as predictors of intention to leave the Defence Forces in the regression analysis.

Low pay overall, including duty pay, was noted to cause significant difficulties for privates, and there was a strong view that the pay does not reflect the work carried out. A number of privates reported having a second job and examples were given of instances when it had cost privates money to come to work (e.g. because of childcare costs).

Findings from the interviews suggest that the low pay may partially explain the high index score for commuting pressure (66%), and this pressure was identified as a significant predictor of intention to leave in the regression analysis. A number of privates spoke about not being able to afford to rent or purchase a home near their place of work, but also of not being able to afford the commuting costs of getting to work.

Poor pension entitlement

There is widespread dissatisfaction with the pension entitlement for newer recruits.

This conclusion is reflected in the mean index score for pension, which at 16% is the second lowest of all the index scores for this group. Sixty percent of those intending to leave indicated that their job opportunities would be too limited by the time they were eligible to receive their pension. It was also highlighted in interviews with privates that while eligibility for a pension after 21 years used to be an incentive to remain in the Defence Forces, this option was not available for newer recruits and this has an impact on intention to leave.

Workload and work–life imbalance

The impact of workload and staffing, particularly in terms of undertaking 24-hour duties, is a source of concern for privates and has a negative impact on work–life planning.

More than two-thirds (63%) of privates who expressed an intention to leave identified 'staffing levels a problem' as a highly relevant reason for leaving, and almost one in four (24%) identified the work environment as being too demanding. Working in the Defence Forces as a private has a negative impact on work-life balance and this is evidenced by the low work-life planning index score (25%) and by high levels of burnout (62%).

Twenty-four-hour duties were particularly highlighted as having a negative impact on work-life balance, especially in terms of the number of these that privates are expected to do, the short notice given, the tiredness associated with them and the financial costs involved, especially where privates have children. Privates in the naval service drew attention to the long periods of time they are at sea, and this was identified as having a negative impact on their family life. Others highlighted challenges in going overseas; while it was noted that there are 'family-friendly spots', it was suggested that their numbers are insufficient for the numbers of privates who want to avail of them.

Career progression

Progression for privates is determined on the basis of points, which are awarded for courses, overseas trips and other criteria. There is a requirement for those with newer contracts to be promoted to the next level within a certain period of time in order to remain in the Defence Forces. There is a low level of satisfaction with this aspect of the Defence Forces and it has an impact on intention to leave.

Fewer training and promotion opportunities were identified as a significant predictor of intention to leave in the regression analysis, and the mean index score for this area is low at 32%. Key issues identified in respect of the promotion process included an imbalance between the needs of personnel (who might need to move to a different area to earn points) and the needs of the particular unit or division; the requirement for overseas experiences, which may not be feasible for some personnel due to family reasons; insufficient promotional opportunities; additional responsibilities on promotion without adequate compensation; limited access to courses required for promotion; and a negative impact on family life.

Accommodation, equipment and facilities

There is widespread dissatisfaction among privates with Defence Forces accommodation and facilities.

The satisfaction with accommodation index score is 33%. Issues raised by privates include the overall condition of the accommodation, shared sleeping arrangements and gym facilities. It was suggested that a small number of privates were sleeping in their cars due to a lack of availability of accommodation, while others expressed a preference to commute long distances rather than stay in Defence Forces accommodation. There was some criticism of the response to problems arising with accommodation, with privates noting that issues are sometimes not dealt with in a sympathetic or timely way.

Challenges were also identified in respect of equipment and facilities, and it was suggested that standards have been lowered in relation to these areas. This is reflected in the job satisfaction (specific) mean index score of 26%. This index includes items relating to the availability and standard of equipment and facilities.

Other issues relating to the organisational context

Low levels of satisfaction were identified via the information sharing and decision making index (16%), perceptions of manager support index (37%) and organisational commitment index (38%). These issues were also identified in the findings from the interviews.

Some privates identified management as an important element of the overall structure within which they work. While some commentary relating to immediate managers was positive, there were concerns about the amount of time privates were being asked to work, about privates not being supported to undertake courses that could benefit them, about privates not being given flexibility in their work–life balance, about pressure being applied to work additional hours and about privates being charged with insubordination without sufficient reason. This commentary may also reflect the perceived lack of involvement in information sharing and decision making, lack of voice regarding remuneration, and differences between officers and privates in their terms and conditions. It is of note that lower perceptions of manager support, lower perceived impact and lower organisational commitment were all significant predictors of intention to leave in the regression analysis.

Differences between army, naval service and air corps

The regression analysis did not identify any variation in intention to leave across the army, naval service or air corps. The commentary suggests, however, that working in the naval service is more challenging for privates, particularly in terms of work–life balance, workload and accommodation.

Conclusion

Personnel taking part in this study identified a number of positive features of working within the Defence Forces. These are the camaraderie and peer support personnel receive from each other, the variability and the excitement of the work they do, and the pride with which they serve their country. Across each of the three groups, however, it is clear that, despite these positive elements, personnel feel disrespected and undervalued. Sometimes these feelings were expressed as anger. Many personnel noted that the challenges of remaining within the Defence Forces outweigh the positive features, and there is considerable anger, particularly among enlisted ranks and privates.

Across each of the three ranks, there is widespread dissatisfaction with pay, allowances and pension arrangements. However, officers and more senior NCOs expressed greater concern for more junior ranks than for their own pay and conditions and the impact of decreases in take home pay is particularly challenging for privates and lower enlisted ranks. There is widespread agreement that the overall remuneration for the responsibility and level of work undertaken is insufficient, and there is a sense of grievance that pay restoration following the cuts imposed following the 2008 economic crisis has not taken place. Payment for duty allowances was singled out for particular mention in this regard, and personnel suggested the amount paid for 24 hours was insulting and derisory.

Perceptions of inadequate financial remuneration, coupled with changes in pension entitlements, emerged as clear reasons for individuals not wanting to remain in the Defence Forces, and there is a strong belief that a long-term career in the Defence Forces is no longer possible. Those who join the Defence Forces upon finishing school will become eligible for a full pension in their late forties or early fifties, and it was suggested that at this stage, while it may be possible to get a job, it is almost impossible to start a new career.

Working in the Defence Forces has a negative impact on work–life balance. This arises from a lack of choice surrounding working long hours (particularly where there are excessive workloads), having to undertake 24-hour duties and having to be available to the Defence Forces 24/7. These factors create uncertainties relating to work–life planning. Poor work–life balance also arises as a result of barracks closures, which for some personnel result in long commutes from home to work. These issues with commuting are compounded by the issues regarding pay.

Some commentary focused on mental health challenges. While the support provided by the Personal Social Service within the Defence Forces is valued, there are also concerns that an acknowledgement of mental health problems can lead to some restrictions in certain activities.

The organisational context – particularly the findings in respect of the information sharing and decision making index (18%), which for each of the three groups was the lowest-scoring index – does need some consideration. It is likely that the low score is partially due to personnel feeling that they lack any voice when negotiations about their pay and conditions take place and to the impact of retention challenges, particularly where work-life balance is interrupted. This is reflected in the findings from the autonomy index which was identified as a relevant factor in driving a number of outcomes, including job satisfaction and work–life planning. Accommodation for privates and NCOs is problematic, as is the absence of a sufficient budget for repairs of buildings and facilities.

The conclusions from this study suggest that the Defence Forces is at a critical juncture. The findings presented intimate that without immediate and substantial intervention, particularly in respect of pay, allowances and pension entitlements, the organisation may, within a short time, face major difficulties in maintaining its personnel and in carrying out its mandate.