

Partnership & Progress

SIGNAL talks to the Director of the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCP), Lucy Fallon Byrne, about what the Partnership process could mean for the Defence Forces.

Anyone working in any sector in modern Ireland has heard of Partnership. For those working in the public sector, it is a phrase often used at meetings, seminars and conferences. But what does it actually mean? For the Defence Forces, inclusion in the Partnership process came about in 2003 with the establishment of the Defence Forces National Partnership Steering Group chaired by the Assistant Chief of Staff (Support) Brig Gen Dan Rea.

This steering group has issued a framework document for Partnership in the Defence Forces, laying out the key objectives of the Partnership process. Various National Agreements since 1987 cemented a Partnership approach at national level to address some of the key economic and social issues facing Ireland as a country. A growing realisation emerged that Partnership approaches at all levels in the workplace could be equally productive.

According to the past national wage agreement, Partnership 2000, the parent process which formalised and outlines how the overall process should work, the

objectives of Partnership in the public service are; "to achieve joint ownership by management, unions and staff and to replace the adversarial approach to change with an open and co-operative process based on effective consultation and participation by all concerned for the progression and implementation of strategic goals, service delivery objectives and associated action programmes."

Therefore, the Partnership process is very much a child of existing industrial relations structures. With Partnership, discussions exist at a 'roundtable' level between military management, departmental civil servants and representative associations in the form of RACO and PDFORRA. Brigadier General Dan Rea currently holds the rotating chair of these round-table discussions, with the agreement of all the participants. Currently, some of the topics under discussion at the Partnership forum include the Review of Defence Forces Medical Services, the provision of childcare facilities and decentralisation. According to the framework document for the Defence Forces, issued by the Defence Forces

National Partnership Steering Group:

"The challenge for all stakeholders in the Defence Forces is to develop a Partnership which will provide opportunities for increased personnel involvement in decision making, utilise a joint problem solving approach, achieve consensus on the implementation of changes and developments thereby simultaneously improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation while meeting the needs of management, representative associations and Defence Force members."

As a result of the introduction of Partnership into the Defence Forces in 2003, agreement was reached on the shape of the Partnership structures to be used. This subsequently led to the setting up and developing Partnership structures at national level which are currently being rolled-out to each of the army Brigades, Defence Forces Training Centre, Air Corps, Naval Service and Defence Forces Headquarters. Partnership structures within the Defence Forces will ultimately consist of the Defence Forces National Partnership Steering Group, Brigade/Service Partnership Committees and Partnership





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Working Groups to focus on specific projects within the agreement.

Background

Lucy Fallon Byrne, director of the NCPP, describes the background to the Centre and its relationship with the Defence Forces. “Our primary focus is to look at supporting innovation and change through the Partnership process. What we can do for the Defence Forces is help create the momentum for change at national level. We would support organisational change that can help foster positive development. What we focus on is taking large-scale issues and making them into practical processes so that employees can feel that they have ownership of the Partnership process within their organisation. At present we are working hard to move from first phase Partnership to second phase Partnership. We also develop communication links and networking capabilities.” Lucy is keen to dispel the notion that the NCPP has a hands on role in any one organisation or sector, or that they make change happen. “We help foster and facilitate the Partnership process, that’s our biggest role.” The relationship with the Defence Forces to date has been limited, but encouraging. “We would be helping them ensure that their model of

Partnership is suited to their particular situation. We say that Partnership should be the way you do things rather than something that you do. That’s very important. We want organisations to try and work Partnership into their existing structures.” The Partnership idea then, in its purest form, means that someone on the lower level within the Defence Forces can have an input into change at the top, and be informed as to the direction of that change. “It’s proactive problem solving. It shouldn’t become stagnated with protracted discussions about each element of change. It’s all about teamwork.

The Defence Forces is an organisation in which teamwork is vital; it is built around it. That’s something we would be promoting, because the building blocks for successful Partnership are already there.” The NCPP does not have a statutory role in arbitration in problem solving or disputes but do have a consultancy role. “To be honest, there is no organisation with statutory roles to help solve problems within the Partnership process. There is probably the need for such a function.” The rigid structure of the chain of command within the Defence Forces would surely present severe problems for a fluid Partnership process? “Every organisation

and sector works within their own parameters, their own core principles. Obviously the nature of Defence Forces work is reliant upon a proper command structure, particularly in an operational environment. That’s not something that we’re seeking to influence. What the NCPP can do is help the organisation in less robust tasks, in roles which lay the structure for the overall success of the Defence Forces’ work.”

Challenges Ahead

Lucy Fallon Byrne comments that there is an onus on the Defence Forces to change and evolve in tandem with global events and developments. “It is our view that everybody should be involved in that development, within the parameters that exist.” The Doyle report on the Challenge of a Workplace, and the Defence Forces response to it in the form of the Independent Monitoring Group (IMG) is something that has impressed the NCPP. Lucy believes it is a harbinger of great success using the Partnership structure. “The way in which the Defence Forces dealt with it was very impressive. There was a great degree of honesty and a realisation that something had to be done. The set-up of the IMG was a great example of Partnership in action, with all levels

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Union. "There has been a huge level of interest, we have been inundated with questions about our Partnership structure. In European terms we are well ahead of most countries in terms of social Partnership and dialogue."

The Objectives

What are the goals of the Partnership structures which are in place in organisations such as the Defence Forces? "We're trying to imbue a new dynamism in the process, to really get a sense of what the future work place will be like. We need flexible, fluid, diverse and knowledge based organisations. We are setting out the requirements of the future workplace and we're seeking help from organisations engaged in the Partnership process to help us achieve that." There are still many concerns though, according to the NCPP. Its director speaks of a "knowledge and opportunities divide," where information is not accessible to all and where opportunities are only open to the upper echelons. "That is something which we're constantly seeking to address, as it stifles to whole notion of Partnership." While this is a voluntary system, backed up by the national and social agreements, there are also cases of organisations just paying lip service to the Partnership notion. The NCPP points out that key challenges for public

service bodies, including the Defence Forces, rests in issues such as awards schemes for employees and knowledge management. Lucy Fallon Byrne does refer to latent skepticism, which may exist within the DF in relation to the Partnership process. "I think when people realise that is really about planning for the future success of an organisation, it becomes a lot more acceptable. Sometimes, the nature of Social Partnership agreements has created a hierarchical perception of Partnership. Where people feel that they must have a Partnership structure. That obviously doesn't help us at all; organisations establishing Partnership committees because they feel they have to, rather than understanding the reasons why they should implement a Partnership structure." While the Defence Forces are in what the NCPP would describe as the "early stages," the Director has described their attitude so far as "very receptive." Returning to a point that she makes earlier, Lucy Fallon Byrne says that it is vital that this receptiveness is evident throughout the chain of command within the Defence Forces, not just at certain levels; "It must be seen to be an important item on the agenda at the highest level. We need to increase interaction at that level."

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What makes the Defence Forces a good place for Partnership to work? "I am aware that there has been almost continuous reorganisation of the Defence Forces over the past number of years and I'm a firm believer that Partnership works best when it's used as a tool for managing change. I think it would be very difficult for the DF to go through that amount of evolution and change without having some sort of Partnership 'ethos' in place. Partnership is a good way of realising and implementing that level of change and people need to be aware of the direction of an organisation." How have the Representative Associations, such as RACO, helped facilitate the Partnership process. "They have been excellent, it's great that they are so committed to the process. Their worth was there for all to see in the aftermath of the Doyle Report and because RACO is a relatively new organisation they have a greater sense of dynamism than most more established organs of representation. They appear to really represent the views of their members." Partnership in Ireland received a tremendous boost as a result of the EU Presidency and the accession on May 1st of ten new nations into the European

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