

Report to the Minister on the Doolin Coast Guard Unit and Recommendations for a reinstatement of the Unit.

Overview:

I do not intend to reprise the narrative which has led to the standing down of the Doolin Coast Guard Unit for operational reasons on Nov2nd 2021 following the sudden resignation of 6 members from the Unit.

This narrative has been adequately ventilated and documented in the presentations to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications by Senior Officials in the Department.

Members of the Committee outlined their respective concerns during the debate and interaction during the Committees' deliberations.

Their respective presentations provide a detailed account and chronology of the various attempts, and these are considerable, to resolve the issues which have arisen in the Doolin Coast Guard Unit over several years.

External mediation/communication expertise has been engaged in extensive interaction with each of the volunteers within the Unit .

In addition, the Department itself at a senior level, has conducted "one to one engagement "over a two day period as recently as 6/7th July 2021.

Regretfully I have formed the conclusion that no form of mediation will lead to a resolution of the matters of disputation in the Unit.

Current Process:

I was appointed by the Minister after the Joint Oireachtas Committee hearing and in response to the request of various members of the Oireachtas for my involvement.

I met with Department officials prior to my potential appointment on November 15th to explore the aspects of the current dispute within and pertaining to the Unit and to evaluate the parameters for mediation and given the urgency to have matters in contention resolved.

The necessity for urgent intervention is emphasised by the unprecedented resignation of 6 members of the Unit between the 27th/29th October 2021.

I met separately with the Sector Manager of the region, the existing 12 volunteers, and the 6 resigned volunteers in Doolin Coast Guard Station on the evening of Monday November 22nd.

The Department provided forms to all concerned outlining the technicalities surrounding mediation and an “Agreement to Mediate” for signature by the participants.

Some volunteers were expecting a further one to one engagement, but I indicated that the process I was conducting did not envisage such engagements and that the earlier engagements did not lead to a conclusion or resolution of the issues in dispute.

Issues Arising:

At my meetings with the volunteers,

I outlined the basis for my involvement, the circumstances relating to my appointment, the objectives for the process, the urgency to find a solution and the necessity for a frank and confidential engagement on the issues identified in earlier mediation/interview sessions and

long standing concerns relating the dysfunctional interpersonal relationships between members of the Unit.

I referred to my reading of previous engagements with them by the external bodies and the outcomes from these individual and confidential interviews. The analysis of these interviews did not reflect well on the interpersonal relationships within the Unit and the implications of this and other aspects of the operation of the station and for the future of the Unit.

Two OiCs have resigned from the Unit in recent times and there have been other resignations in the past.

All the Volunteers attended and engaged in the discussions. The meetings covered many aspects of the operation of the Unit, both currently and historically.

Issues raised related primarily to the interactions with the Department/management of the Coast Guard Service, the lack of feedback from the Graphite and Departmental interviews, the increasing constraints on the local operation of equipment and training opportunities within the Unit, the restrictions on training / opportunities, particularly around the Cliffs of Moher, previous resignations, a previous dismissal, and equipment quality, storage and utilisation.

In summary the volunteers were of the strong opinion the bureaucracy around procedures, form filling and increasing health and safety regulation was leading to “an adverse to risk culture in the Service “rather than engaging with volunteers on the practical realities of search and rescue operations and their respective skills acquired , in some cases, of almost 30 plus years of volunteering in the immediate area of this part of West Clare.

Despite several efforts by me the volunteers did not respond to my attempts to get an engagement on the identification of the interpersonal difficulties between them and which formed such a major and negative narrative in the Graphite HRM Report (Feb 2020).

Conclusions and Recommendations:

The Irish Coast Guard Service comprises 920 dedicated and highly experienced Volunteers, covering 44 stations and is managed by a complement of 10 full time officials based nationally and in key locational stations around our coastal waters.

They are a core part of our search and rescue operations and bring an extraordinary level of commitment and a multitude of different levels of expertise to the Service.

The Irish Coast Guard has been engaged over recent years in a considerable level of reorganisation and increased professionalism and a physical and technological upgrading of coast guard stations around the country.

The Doolin Unit has a commendable record in the Irish Coast Guard Service with an impressive track record of rescue operations. It covers an area which includes some of the most visited tourist venues in the country, including the iconic Cliffs of Moher and the ferry services to the Aran Islands.

The Doolin Station is a “state of the art” new building in the Coast Guard Service.

Currently certain arrangements have been put in place to cover the essential services which are necessary from a search and rescue point of view for the area.

These arrangements are necessary also to provide reassurance to the local community and visitors to the area that in the unfortunate event that sea/cliff/land incidents occur a rescue service is available in a professional and timely manner.

These are temporary arrangements only. If no resolution is forthcoming, then a more permanent re-arrangement of the Doolin based services will be necessary.

I conveyed this view on several occasions at both meetings.

It is not reasonable or good practice to rely on the current ad hoc arrangements and the good offices of the Gardai, Fire Brigade and other rescue services. These services have limited availability.

The solution requires a permanent and functional Coast Guard Unit in Doolin.

Members of the Unit must now make some sensitive and personally challenging decisions in the interest of the restoration of the Doolin Coast Guard Unit to operational effectiveness.

These decisions have to take place also in the context of specific management actions and responses to the issues raised by the volunteers

My recommendations are framed in this context and the fact that this is a volunteer service where individuals are selected for their skills, experience and capability of working in a team effectively, reliably and with complete trust in each other in challenging conditions at sea, cliff face and other land-based events.

Recommendations:

1. Interpersonal Relationships:

The Graphite HRM Report makes the following observation:

“The core issues in the Unit centre around a complete absence of trust , respect and in some cases an absence in terms of a desire to resolve matters. The issues are entrenched within many years of interpersonal differences and disputes which now involves (be it varying degrees of involvement) potentially nearly half the members within the Doolin Unit “.

By any standard this statement raises significant concerns around the effectiveness, cohesion and safety of the Unit. Genuine attempts/initiatives, as recommended in the Graphite HRM Report, by the management of the ICGS , with external expertise, to improve the situation have no succeeded to date. The tragic accident of Sept 2016, involving the Kilkee coastal rescue unit has had a major impact on the Irish Coast Guard . It has had and continues to have an ongoing impact in the Doolin Unit and for reasons best known to those who have personal relationship and collegiate connections to that accident among the volunteer group.

However, some of the issues in the Unit precede this tragic event.

A Coast Guard crew /unit must effectively operate/ communicate and train together in an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and confidence.

That situation does not currently exist, and certain relationships are fractured and have irretrievably broken down.

It is my view that this fractured relationship is not capable of being resolved through normal mediation processes.

This situation has persisted for too long and has remained, despite several efforts, to continue to divide the Unit. As I outline below it is not the only issue which needs a proactive response by both Management and the Volunteers themselves.

The community, visitors and those who operate business services in the region deserve a positive and reliable outcome to this dispute and cannot allow it to continue in perpetuity.

There is no capacity currently to resolve the interpersonal relationships /non relationships in the Unit.

Recommendation 1:

Therefore having regard to the history within the Unit, and the prolonged and exceptional circumstances in the Doolin Unit, the Minister and the Coast Guard Service should move with immediate effect to reconstitute the Doolin volunteer team.

The Coast Guard Service should reinstate immediately those members of the Unit who management believe can work and operate together in a collegiate and co-operative manner.

It is of a vital necessity that this course of action should instil a new and positive culture of teamwork, professionalism and “esprit de corps” and which meets all the general/specific requirements of the Coast Guard Service as outlined in the Voluntary Services & Training Code Coast Guard Code. (Memo 57/09).

The reconstituted Unit should be given sufficient time to develop a culture between them of mutual respect and trust.

Within a further period and when deemed appropriate a further expansion of the Unit should be considered to build the Unit back up to full strength from local volunteers and preferably before next Summer.

I recognise that the initial reconstituted Unit will put a heavy reliance on those volunteers who are selected by the Coast Guard Service and other supplementary arrangements may need to be put in place as a temporary arrangement while the Unit is being restored to a full complement.

Recommendation 2.

(a) Management and Volunteer Engagement.

I make the following recommendations with the intention of ensuring a pro-active engagement by both management and the volunteers and resolving the existing operational concerns between them.

It is a matter of regret also that no individual feedback from the one-to-one interview sessions took place either from those conducted by Graphite HRM in February 2020 and Departmental Officials/Carr Communications in July 2021. There are circumstances which may have impeded such a full engagement.

This created enormous frustration among the volunteers and was one of the primary reasons for the recent resignation of the 6 volunteers.

Efforts were made by the Department to address some of these issues as instanced by their detailed letter of February 14th 2020 and follow up.

The onset of restrictions imposed arising from Covid 19 led to some restraints on meetings/training and local engagement.

(b). *Additional Actions Required by Management:*

The following concerns of the Volunteer Crew should be addressed by Management:

- An immediate engagement with those volunteers who wish to continue in the Unit on the use of training facilities/equipment within the Station.
- Reassessment of the return to use of cliff-based rescue arrangements/training on the Cliffs of Moher. This arose from an external report and not one commissioned by the Coast Guard Service.
- Tractor towing licence arrangements to be reassessed for the movement of boats and some moderation of restrictions.
- A clear protocol on the usage of vehicles for training purposes.
- A schedule of ongoing Training activities for volunteers, taking cognisance of Covid 19 regulations, that covers a plan for 2022/23.
- Planning of a revitalised “off site “ bonding activities with a view towards creating a new esprit de corps within the Unit .
- Where new directions/regulations regarding Health and Safety obligations are being considered and which potentially have the effect of altering existing and well established practices for volunteers locally then a process of consultation with the national representative group (

CUAG) is undertaken to evaluate their efficacy and if implemented their effect upon training and actual operations.

- The above should apply also to the degree/level that “paperwork “and which is an additional burden on volunteers, is undertaken by management.

(c) Actions Required by all Volunteers in the Doolin Unit :

Whilst acknowledging their individual professionalism and commitment the Unit must act as a coherent unit and operate accordingly.

- Training is paramount and timekeeping, attendance and attention to detail is essential.
- No use of mobile phones in the unit during training.
- Attendance at debriefs arising from specific search and rescue operations is mandatory.
- Interaction with colleagues is basic to good operational effectiveness and health and safety.
- Dignity and respect works both ways with appropriate interaction with the OiC and Deputy OiC in the unit .
- These Officers are appointed by the Coast Guard Service and co-operation with them in their respective roles is required and is not an option.
- Both of these Officers need to operate as a working management team and sharing the operation/training on an agreed basis.

- Co-operation where required with Department /Management directions and especially where previous consultations on the operational changes has occurred.
- I examined the outcomes of the recent dismissal case and have satisfied myself that the investigation in that case was conducted appropriately. This matter should no longer be an issue in the Unit.

I believe that the above recommendations, if accepted, will provide a sound basis for the restoration of the Doolin Coast Guard Unit .

I would appeal also to those volunteers who resigned to make themselves available for consideration for future service in the Unit .

I do not underestimate the challenge involved in my recommendations.

The primary concerns here is, that given the importance of the station and its location, a Unit must be available at all times and the responsibility lies with the Coast Guard service to provide it.

The selection of volunteers for engagement in the Unit is solely their authority.

Recommendation 3.

CUAG :

CUAG is the officially recognised representative body for volunteers in service.

In view of the issues that have in the course of my involvement in this dispute and related matters raised at the Joint Oireachtas

Committee I believe the role of CUAG should be extended and its capacity as a representative body enhanced.

I recommend that IRCG management and CUAG should engage in discussions to assess the latter's role in providing a representative role in matters relating to serving members, while at all stages recognising that it is a volunteer service.

In particular, a representative role would be appropriate to those Sections of the Code relating to discipline, grievance and complaints and termination of membership. (Sections 12-16).

Kieran Mulvey

Mediator.