**Joint Committee on Public Service Oversight and Petitions, 17 June 2015**

**Opening Statement by Minister Flanagan**

Chairman, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting me to discuss my Department’s role concerning requests to permit landings by foreign military aircraft at Irish airports and their passage through Irish airspace.

As a former member of the Committee, I am a strong supporter of its role and I believe it has the capacity to make an important positive contribution to our democratic process.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has been happy to cooperate fully with the Committee’s consideration of this Petition. In response to queries raised by the Committee, written replies issued from my Department in December 2013 and May 2014. Secretary General Burgess met with you last December and subsequently sent a written response to a number of follow-up queries. I trust that this intensive level of engagement has proven useful in your deliberations. [It may be helpful if I offer some opening remarks, to set the scene and to touch on a few points which I understand are of particular interest to the Committee.

As you will be aware, responsibility concerning the regulation of aircraft is shared between a number of Departments. My Department has the lead role in respect of foreign military aircraft. In administering this role, it consults with the Departments of Transport, Tourism and Sport; Defence; and Justice and Equality. Lead responsibility for the regulation of civil aircraft lies with the Department of Transport, Tourism, and Sport which consults as appropriate with other Departments, including Foreign Affairs and Trade, in relation to applications concerning the carriage of munitions of war.

My Cabinet colleague, Minister Paschal Donohoe, discussed the regulation of civil aircraft when he met with the Committee on 18 February. I shall therefore focus my remarks on the regulation of foreign military aircraft. As you are aware from previous discussions, landings and overflights by foreign military aircraft are governed by strict conditions, including that aircraft must be unarmed and must carry no arms, ammunition or explosives.

The total numbers of requests for permission for landings by foreign military aircraft at Irish airports has not varied hugely over time. Over the period 2010 to 2014, the average annual number of requests was 721. This is broadly in line with the figure for 2004. The majority of requests originate from the US, with US aircraft accounting for an average of 85% of requests over the past five years.

Some 1,321 requests and notifications in respect of overflights by foreign military aircraft were made last year. This represents a substantial reduction on the 2013 figure of 1,762. Data for the first quarter of 2015 suggest a continuing downward trend. Again, the majority of overflights concern US aircraft.

It is not surprising that the majority of flights arise in respect of US aircraft. As Minister Donohoe remarked when he met the Committee in February, this is more a function of geography than policy.

I am aware that in the meeting with Minister Donohoe, a number of Members raised the issue of military neutrality and I understand that this may be among the issues that you wish to discuss this afternoon. The Government is committed to the long-standing policy of military neutrality which is characterised by non participation in military alliances. This commitment was publicly reaffirmed in the major statement of foreign policy priorities that we published last January - “The Global Island: Ireland’s Foreign Policy for a Changing World” which states that “Our policy of military neutrality remains a core element of Irish foreign policy.”

The Global Island sets out values which guide our foreign policy. These are drawn from Article 29 of the Constitution which refers to principles including “the ideals of peace and friendly co-operation amongst nations” and “the pacific settlement of international disputes.” They are drawn also from the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The policy highlights the importance of international peace and stability for Ireland: “Supporting greater peace, security and development is also in our interest as a small country with an open economy in an ever more interconnected and uncertain world.” Accordingly we allocate a high priority to activities in support of these objectives, including our unbroken commitment over five decades to UN peacekeeping, the priority which we attach to promoting and protecting human rights and our longstanding commitment to working through the Irish Aid programme for the eradication of poverty and hunger.

Our policy of military neutrality, accordingly, forms part and parcel of an outward-looking and proactive engagement in the international community.

The long-standing practice of permitting US and other foreign military aircraft to overfly Ireland and to land at Irish airports has been considered by successive Governments to be consistent with the policy of military neutrality. We have never withdrawn or suspended the use of facilities at Shannon at any stage in the more than 50 years since arrangements were first put in place. Ireland has not entered into a military alliance with the US or with any other country or organisation.

The longstanding arrangements in relation to Shannon should also be seen in the context of our strong cooperative relationship with the United States. We make Shannon available to the US and to other nations with which we have friendly relations. Our relationship with the US has evolved from and been strengthened by the personal ties that bind our citizens. Our Governments cooperate closely on many fronts. The US has been a major positive influence over many years in bringing about and sustaining peace in Northern Ireland. We have engaged constructively with the US Administration on interim measures to address the needs of the undocumented in the US. The strong economic relations between the two countries, in investment and trade, represent a major driver for jobs and economic growth in Ireland.

Before I conclude, I want to acknowledge again the value and importance of the Committee’s consideration of the issues raised by the petition. The system of regulation for foreign military aircraft was put in place many years ago and the Order under which I am assigned primary responsibility dates from 1952. My Department keeps arrangements under ongoing review and has revised policy and procedures incrementally in response to specific changes over time.

It is important to ensure that our approach keeps pace with changing circumstances and technology and to ensure that we have in place a system which can be further adapted to take account of future change. In this context the Committee’s work is timely and will be particularly helpful in identifying issues to be addressed. I will be happy to ensure that all due account is taken of your conclusions and recommendations.

Thank you again Chairman for the invitation and I would be happy to answer Members’ questions.