

Chairman,

On behalf of the Garda Commissioner, I thank you for the invitation made to An Garda Síochána, by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health, to address them regarding the Misuse of Drugs (Supervised Injecting Facilities) Bill 2016.

I wish to introduce my colleagues, Assistant Commissioner Nolan, and Detective Superintendent Howard, Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau.

Members of this Committee will be aware, I am sure, that Government policy on tackling the drug problem is set out in the National Drugs Strategy 2009-2016, which, it is planned, will shortly be replaced by new Strategy covering the period 2017 onwards. The overall objective of the Strategy is to continue to tackle the harm caused to individuals and society by the misuse of drugs through a concerted focus on the five pillars of supply reduction, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and research.

Tackling the supply of drugs remains a key element of the National Drugs Strategy and in this regard, An Garda Síochána continues to place a particular focus on tackling misuse of drugs from a supply control perspective. This is reflected in An Garda Síochána's Policing Plans, in which tackling drugs and organised crime is set out as a core focus of our work. To achieve relevant objectives, multi-disciplinary approaches are utilised with a view to ensuring that those involved in illicit drugs activity are effectively targeted, including through the use of drugs legislation, the proceeds of crime legislation, money laundering legislation and the powers of the Criminal Assets Bureau.

The National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau continues to lead out the policing strategy for tackling drugs supply and working closely with the local drug units across the State. This approach allows for the co-ordinated use of Garda resources in tackling all forms of organised crime, including illicit drug activity nationwide.

An Garda Síochána has recently launched a modernisation and renewal programme which includes a plan to build on our expertise in the drugs and organised crime area by amalgamating our skills and introducing a special crime task force to focus on criminals working at lower levels in organised crime gangs. Results achieved to date include, significant arrests and seizures which have substantially disrupted and degraded organised crime gangs by taking guns, drugs and cash from them. Lives have been saved and more than twelve (12) assassination attempts have been foiled.

When the Garda Commissioner appeared before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality, on 12th October 2016, she stated that between 9 March 2015, when the drugs and organised crime bureau was established, and September 2016, An Garda Síochána seized over €1.9 million in cash, as well as 35 guns and 1,000 rounds of ammunition, including AK-74 assault rifles, submachine guns, sawn-off shotguns, Glock pistols and other semi-automatic weapons and silencers. Drugs worth more than €36 million have been seized and we have arrested 167 people for drug trafficking, money laundering and possession of firearms. On that occasion the Commissioner referred to the fact that the many organised crime gangs, that operate internationally, cannot be tackled effectively without international co-operation and that in this regard, we work actively with our counterparts in Europe and with the Europol and Interpol organisations.

However, An Garda Síochána is acutely aware that supply reduction is but one of five pillars through which the harm caused to individuals and society by the misuse of drugs must be tackled. For this purpose, the Garda Síochána is committed to doing all it can to support initiatives undertaken by the State with regard to the other four pillars, namely, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and research.

An Garda Síochána is aware that a commitment to support a health-led rather than criminal justice approach to drugs use, including legislating for injection

rooms, was set out, in May 2016, in chapter 5, titled 'Health', '*A Programme for a Partnership Government*'. Furthermore, we are aware that on 15th December 2015, the Government decided to include additional Heads in the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill, to provide enabling provisions for supervised injecting facilities. We understand, these provisions will enable the Minister for Health to issue licences permitting the establishment of supervised injecting facilities to provide enhanced clinical support to, and mitigate the problem of public injecting by, chronic drug users.

There is no doubt that there is a problem with street injecting in Dublin and elsewhere. It is accepted that this practice is unhygienic and poses a significant health risk for the drug users themselves and results in discarded needles which present a public health risk to others. An Garda Síochána understands that the establishment of supervised injecting facilities has been proposed to ameliorate this problem.

An Garda Síochána is aware, it is envisaged that initially one supervised injecting facility will be established on a pilot basis in Dublin city centre. An Garda Síochána will do all it can to assist in ensuring the initiative succeeds in achieving its objectives. We are aware that an independent evaluation will be an intrinsic element to the initiative, designed to determine the utility, safety and cost-effectiveness of the supervised injecting facility in an Irish context and that the outcome of such an evaluation will inform any decision to licence further facilities. In this regard, we will ensure that the policing and law enforcement issues which arise from the existence of a supervised injecting facility, will be shared with all concerned, for the purpose of informing the planned independent evaluation.

Dealing with the law enforcement issues which arise as a consequence of opening a supervised injecting facility of the type proposed, requires the making of necessary amendments to existing relevant legislation. An Garda Síochána is aware that the drafting of a Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill, which it is

intended will contain provisions which will allow for the licensing, provision and operation of supervised injecting facilities under specific circumstances, whilst protecting the public health and ensuring that the prohibition on possession and supply of illicit drugs outside of such facilities is adequately maintained, is at an advanced stage.

Upon enactment of planned relevant legislative provisions, An Garda Síochána will be in a position to inform its personnel regarding the appropriate manner in which to address the law enforcement and policing issues which will arise following the opening of a supervised injecting facility. It will facilitate, also, the inclusion of relevant information in policing plans and operational orders. I am sure it will be appreciated that the less ambiguity and the avoidance of grey areas in terms of the legislation which will be introduced to underpin the undertaking of the proposed initiative, the less likely it will be that any law enforcement issue will impact negatively on achieving a successful outcome to the initiative.

Meanwhile An Garda Síochána will continue to develop necessary policing strategies in preparation for the opening of Ireland's first supervised injecting facility. Planning, which, to date, has involved interaction with law enforcement authorities in jurisdictions where supervised injecting facilities have been in place for some time and visiting and observing the policing of such facilities elsewhere.

Thank you Chairman. We welcome the opportunity to answer any questions which the Committee may wish to put to us regarding relevant matters.
