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Opening address to Joint Justice Committee meeting

7 November 2023

Minister for Justice, Ms Helen McEntee TD

Cathaoirleach, members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to address the Committee today.

Thank you for the opportunity to outline how we are building stronger, safer communities and to address some of the issues you have discussed at previous sessions.

The Committee has detailed three areas of discussion, namely recruitment and retention within An Garda Síochána, the policing of Dublin City Centre and policing of protests.

At the outset, I would like to assure you that I and the Government are absolutely committed to doing everything we can to strengthen An Garda Síochána and keep people safe, while acknowledging that the Garda Commissioner is responsible for operational policing matters.

Our commitment is reflected in the unprecedented allocation of €2.31 billion in Budget 2024, up 23% since 2020, to An Garda Síochána.

The Budget will allow for the recruitment of between 800 and 1,000 new Gardaí next year, and will further increase Garda numbers following a Covid enforced

recruitment pause. It also allows us to increase the Garda training allowance by 66 per cent to €305, to further support recruitment.

It also supports the members of An Garda Síochána in the vital work they do in protecting us – in technology, new uniforms, vehicles and supports in the workplace.

While I acknowledge that, due to the pandemic, Garda numbers are not currently where we would like them to be, numbers entering and attesting from the Garda College in Templemore continue to increase.

New classes are entering and graduating every three months - and this continued recruitment will be the driver of more Gardaí on the ground, in Dublin city and across the country.

I recently attended the attestation of 126 members of An Garda Síochána at the Garda College, Templemore, following the passing out of over 100 earlier this year.

Nearly 240 Gardaí have attested so far this year. 177 new trainees entered Templemore last month, the largest intake since COVID, meaning that almost 500 trainees are currently in the system, with one more class due into Templemore in December.

The pandemic also contributed to a rapid change in the way people work – working from home, from abroad, working part time, changing careers many times in the course of a lifetime. Ireland is also at full employment with many choices available to people.

However, despite all the challenges we face, we are on track to have between 700 and 800 new recruits into the college in 2023.

I was also pleased to secure a 25 per cent increase in the overtime budget for An Garda Síochána - to €131 million from €105 million - for high visibility policing to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour.

This is in addition to the €10 million I announced during the summer to provide an enhanced visible Garda presence at strategic locations in Dublin city centre and increased deployment of the Garda National Public Order Unit in the city centre, with €2m of the €10 million dedicated to increased public order capacity.

However, I also acknowledge that these can only be short term measures and that further recruitment is the long term solution.

The Commissioner has already made a statement to the Committee and answered the members' queries on operational matters.

However, as Minister, it is my responsibility to ensure that the Commissioner and the Gardaí have the resources and equipment they require.

The democratically elected Government also sets the policy direction and legislative agenda, working with the Houses and this Committee to pass modern, fit-for-purpose, laws that will support and govern the actions of Gardaí and ensure that people are safe, and can feel safe.

My priorities are to pass legislation to equip Gardai with body worn cameras and facial recognition technology to ensure they have the most up to date equipment to help protect them and tackle crime.

This legislation will also provide Gardai with the modern technology and equipment they need in the areas of CCTV and automatic number plate recognition to prevent and detect serious crime and protect the security of the State.

And just last week, our new laws to increase the maximum sentence for assaulting a member of An Garda Síochána and other on duty emergency workers increased from seven to 12 years – making it clear that we will not tolerate assaults on our Gardai.

I am also progressing legislation to provide Community Safety Partnerships which will give communities a real say in keep their areas safe.

Our society is changing and developing. We have faced several, once-in-a-lifetime events over the past few years – from a pandemic now thankfully behind us, to an ongoing war in Eastern Europe. Our population is growing, exceeding 5 million for the first time in almost 200 years.

Equally, the nature of crime is changing. We must have a Garda organisation that continuously adapts and reforms, that always strives to keep pace with evolving technologies and criminal enterprises.

Today's Garda Síochána must have specialist units equipped and resourced to tackle new and emerging criminality, such as cybercrime, fraud, and protective services for the most vulnerable victims.

However, and to be clear, this is not an either/or situation.

It is not a case that we have to choose between having Community Gardaí or a cybercrime unit.

We must, and we do, have the benefit of highly skilled Gardaí serving in both.

While a Community Garda or a member on the beat cannot prevent someone being the target of a phishing attack, equally a Garda member assigned to cybercrime cannot act as a deterrent to crimes such as burglary or assault.

That's why the new Operating Model, one of our key reforms, builds on the greatest success of An Garda Síochána over its 101 year history - the strength of its bond with the communities it serves.

This bond will be strengthened through the new Community Policing Structures, with Community Policing Teams serving local people – all made possible by the reforms which are underway.

I know this is not an easy process, and I want to thank the men and women of An Garda Síochána for their commitment in working with this. We need all of these resources – community Gardaí and specialist units and more.

That is why the allocation to the Garda Vote for ICT has increased, with over €155 million provided for Digital Capital Investment and IT.

Skilled Garda Staff, with expertise in ICT and other vital technical and professional grades have increased, with over 3,100 Garda Staff in total now in the organisation, an increase of 56% since the end of 2015.

Over 13,700 mobility devices have been rolled out across the service, allowing members to perform administrative tasks without the need to return to stations. This keeps Gardaí visible, in our towns and villages, on our roads network and across our communities.

Policing as a profession exposes people to sometimes traumatic and challenging incidents – I feel that it is crucial that Garda personnel have access to and avail of appropriate supports when they need them.

To this end, I was pleased to announce that €6m €6m was provided for wellbeing initiatives, medical costs and over 2,500 units of body armour in the recent Budget.

The issues raised by the Committee are all interlinked.

This is a reflection of the fact that policing is an increasingly complex and challenging task. As I have said, it is one that An Garda Síochána has performed for over a century with great distinction.

As noted in one of the contributions to the Committee last month on the matter, policing is a career that requires a sense of vocation.

And we are making great strides in increasing diversity in An Garda Síochána and strengthening the organisation through more sworn and staff members.

If we look back to 1993, there were 10,900 members, only 612 of which were women.

Now, we have nearly 3000 more Gardaí – around 14,000 members, representing an increase of just over 9% since 2015 when there were 12,816 Garda members throughout the country.

It is very welcome that almost 4,000 of our serving Gardai are women, that is one of the highest proportions in the EU and that is a very welcome change. And there are another 3,100 Garda staff on top of that – the highest number on record.

Apart from the closure of Templemore due to the economic crisis over a decade ago, and the unavoidable and enforced closure of the Garda College during the pandemic, An Garda Síochána has grown steadily and consistently.

I also think it's important to recognise and celebrate the increasing skillset and professionalism of the Garda staff who serve the organisation as crime analysts, as forensic accountants, as IT analysts and specialists, as occupational health professionals, as well as in the more traditional but vital administrative roles.

The Garda organisation has not only grown; it has really changed. I believe that this change is for the better.

This organisational strength is, however, not at the level that either I or the Commissioner would wish to see yet. We have both said the target of 15,000 members is not a ceiling – and I firmly believe that we must aim to exceed that figure over the years ahead.

No police service exists in a vacuum, separate from the environment in which it operates and services in other jurisdictions, including the UK, US and Canada,

have all reported very significant challenges in recruitment. As have both the public and private sector and every employer across the country.

We are seeing people leave the organisation earlier than was the case previously. But, people are joining the organisation later in life too, with a range of different life experiences to contribute, and I am pleased to be able to make a change to accommodate that in the next competition.

People are joining An Garda Síochána from different background and with different perspectives. We must, and will, create the conditions to allow these changes to have a positive impact on the culture of An Garda Síochána.

I am grateful to my colleague, Minister Pascal Donohue, for making provision in the Budget to increase the trainee allowance by 66%, from €184 per week to €305 per week whilst recruits undergo their 33 initial weeks of training. This will take effect in January and be backdated to Budget Day so that those currently in training will also get the benefit of this increase. This will, I hope, support a continuation of the momentum in recruitment which we have seen over the past year.

I am also increasing the recruitment age, which is currently set at a maximum of 35 years of age, to help to broaden and diversify the pool of available candidates. We are living longer, we are fitter and healthier, people study for longer, and they may have lived abroad or indeed have served as police officers in their place of birth so it no longer makes sense to bar those in their late 30s and 40s from pursuing a career in policing.

Of course, we must balance this against the need to invest in their training and their ability to accrue a meaningful pension upon retirement.

I have also said that I want to see the retirement age for An Garda Síochána change from its current level of 60. I am in discussions with the Minister for Public Expenditure on this issue.

It is something that members and their staff associations have raised with me, and I hope we can reach a conclusion soon.

I am pleased to say that I am supporting An Garda Síochána to substantially increase the size of the Garda Reserve in the coming years. The Reserve represents a real opportunity for anyone wishing to support policing and give something back to their own community. The Reserve upholds and reinforces An Garda Síochána's strong community links, including with new and disadvantaged communities who may not have traditionally seen such a role for themselves, and it can provide the organisation with vital capacity to draw on additional resources and skills to assist in essential policing functions.

A new recruitment campaign for the Garda Reserve will take place in early 2024 – the first such recruitment campaign since 2017. Consultation is taking place with the Garda Associations and the Policing Authority on new Reserve Regulations, before they are finalised.

These revisions include expanding the areas in which Garda Reserve members can serve. Additionally, the Regulations will ensure that a recruitment campaign is inclusive to attract diverse and under-represented groups, including those from ethnic minorities, with the intention of clearly removing any perceived barriers. The Garda Reserve Strategy, published by the Commissioner, will examine the opportunity to develop an accelerated recruitment stream for Reserve Gardaí to take account of their operational policing experience.

In terms of policing of Dublin City and other communities,; the matter at hand is not just about policing, it is about safety, although Garda visibility is a hugely important part of the picture.

Community safety, it is worth saying, is a complex issue, it is a multi-agency, multi sectoral, whole of Government, issue.

I regularly engage with the Commissioner and with other stakeholders on safety matters and the Gardaí work closely with public sector, NGO and private sector partners who all have a part to play.

Crime and anti-social behaviour have a number of complex, underlying and interlinked causes.

That is why over the last few years I established the pilot Local Community Safety Partnerships, including one in Dublin's North Inner City. The Partnerships bring together all service providers, including the Gardaí, HSE, Tusla, the local authorities and others with the community to work together to prioritise and find solutions to local issues.

No one knows better than local communities what those specific issues are in their own localities and what is needed to help address them.

From putting in place supports for our youth population in amenities and opportunities, to supporting addiction services for drugs and alcohol, cleaning streets and tackling dereliction - each community knows what the problems are and what is required to ensure people feel safe.

The final issue raised by the Committee is that of protests and the policing response. On this point I want to be very clear. The right to peaceable assembly and protest is guaranteed by the Constitution and it is an important right in our democracy.

But what we have seen in some recent examples have not been protests – they have been attempts at intimidation that have no place in our society.

I know all of us in these Houses take our roles, duties and responsibilities to the people very seriously.

I do not believe anyone who has been given the great privilege of serving their constituents should be intimidated as they go about their business.

That is why I asked the Commissioner to carry out a new security and protection review of TDs, senators, their staff and people working on the Oireachtas campus.

The intention of this is to allow those working in the Oireachtas give their views on general security and protection, including as they work in their constituencies.

I will say that the Garda Commissioner's approach of a graduated response has my support. It takes account of the legitimate nature of much protest and does not criminalise people unnecessarily. It allows for robust intervention when it is deemed necessary. Again, I pay tribute to the members of An Garda Síochána who behave with great professionalism and restraint in sometimes difficult circumstances. They understand the importance of their role and their training.

I must address, as well, some issues that were raised at the previous meeting. Evictions and protests by workers were referred to in terms of why the Garda response was different.

The Gardaí have a role in supporting the enforcement of court orders, whilst also balancing the right to protest.

However, the right to assembly within the Constitution is qualified by the need to preserve public order and peace, and to prevent a danger to the public. This is a fine balance for Gardaí to maintain.

It is not, I believe, for me as Minister to review the decisions of Garda officers on the ground. There is an independent complaints system in place where members of the public may complain if they feel that their rights were infringed or that a Garda member acted improperly.

Reform of our policing service was also a theme brought up at the previous session. We must bear in mind that reform is not something that is ever complete. By that, I mean that whilst objectives and goals will be achieved in line with the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland report, that does not mean that we will simply halt there.

An organisation as large, complex and vital as An Garda Síochána can never rest in its pursuit of excellence, innovation and change. For my part, I will continue to work with the Commissioner to ensure that we have a police service that is reflective of today's society, responsive and fully equipped to respond to today's challenges, and future proofed to continue to serve the State for the next century and beyond.

Government is committed to vigorously pursuing this reform and to supporting An Garda Síochána to deliver on their mission of Keeping People Safe, now and into the future.

ENDS