

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice Opening Statement

07 December 2023

Minister for Justice, Ms Helen McEntee TD

I want to thank the Committee for inviting me here today.

I know the thoughts of everyone here remain with the victims of the appalling attack that took place outside Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire a fortnight ago.

We all wish for their full recovery.

The safety of the Irish people has always been foremost in my thoughts and actions during my time in office.

Through the Justice Plan, I have set out an ambitious number of actions to be achieved as we work to build stronger, safer communities.

Resourcing our Gardaí, new tougher sentencing laws, and giving communities a real say in their own safety have all been progressed under my watch.

I have prioritised the enactment of a series of laws intended to increase the safety and security of communities.

Recent legislation provides for substantially increased sentences for a range of offences. This has included:

- doubling the maximum sentence for assault causing harm to 10 years;
- increasing the sentence for conspiracy to murder from 10 years to life;
- and
- increasing the sentence for assaulting a Garda or emergency worker from 7 to 12 years.

New laws have also been enacted which:

- improve the post release supervision of sex offenders and provide for electronic tagging;
- ensure access to certain communications data to protect national security and tackle serious crime; and
- provide stronger Garda powers for the seizure of scramblers.

I have also brought through legislation that will put An Garda Síochána on a clear path to start rolling out bodycams on frontline Gardaí next year.

Gardaí in Dublin City Centre will have access to bodycams from next Spring.

The shocking scenes we witnessed in Dublin show how crucial bodycams are to protecting Gardaí and helping to bring criminals to justice.

We cannot keep sending Gardaí into situations where they are the only ones without the ability to record what is happening.

We also cannot expect Gardaí to keep manually trawling through thousands of hours of footage – when people are rightly calling for more visible policing, this is a shocking waste of their time.

This is why I intend to bring a general scheme for a Garda Síochána (Digital Management and Facial Recognition Technology) Bill to Government in the coming weeks.

As a direct result of the recent disorder the Bill will also allow Gardaí to use facial recognition technology in very limited circumstances to assist in identifying offenders in respect of serious violent offences.

It is a waste of resources to have Gardaí manually reviewing thousands of hours of CCTV footage after an incident such as we seen recently, delaying the arrest and prosecution of those responsible.

Both Body Cameras and complimentary Object and Facial Recognition Technology will greatly enhance An Garda Síochána's ability to identify perpetrators and gather evidence directly.

Policing services across the world have already gained significant benefits from the introduction of these technologies, it's time our Gardaí had the same.

The use of Facial Recognition Technology will only be permitted retrospectively – live processing of data will be forbidden in law.

And the system will be overseen by a High Court judge to ensure that the protection of human rights remains at the heart of our policing approach.

Tackling serious and organised crime is also a key priority for me as Minister for Justice.

This is why I was glad to receive Government approval this week to open extradition negotiations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Democratic values must be defended, and in an increasingly connected world, upholding democracy and the rule of law is a cross-border challenge.

It is important that criminals see there can be no hiding place from the law, and that the State will do everything in its power to bring those who spread misery in our communities to justice.

Response to Riots

Of course, ensuring An Garda Síochána have the resources they need is absolutely crucial.

The Garda budget is a record €2.31 billion in 2024, a 23% increase since I became Minister in 2020.

Recruitment into An Garda Síochána has accelerated and we are now seeing Garda recruits regularly enter Templemore.

By the end of 2023, between 700 and 800 new recruits will have entered the college. It is also anticipated that the number of Garda members will begin to grow steadily throughout 2024 – allowing for retirements and resignations, the number of Garda members is expected to reach approximately 14,500 by end 2024.

Next year we will have another Garda recruitment campaign and a new campaign for the Garda Reserve, the first since 2017.

We have increased the Garda training allowance by two thirds and increased the age of entry from 35 to 50 years

In addition to Garda members, the number of Garda staff has increased to 3,130 at the end of October, an increase of 56% over 2015.

This has facilitated the redeployment of 900 Gardaí from desk jobs to the frontline.

All of these actions are paving the way for us to have more Gardaí, in frontline policing roles, keeping people safe.

In addition to growing the human resources, I have secured significant investment in technology and other tools to support modern policing.

The rollout of Garda mobile devices is now complete so that every Garda has real-time access to a series of apps, eliminating paperwork and allowing them to carry out their frontline duties far more efficiently. The benefits of this cannot be overstated, it is simply a game changer.

The deployment of Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) in Garda vehicles will allow for real-time identification of vehicles as being stolen, untaxed, suspect, or cited as connected with crime or terrorism.

There are over 3,400 Garda vehicles – up 11% since 2020, the largest fleet of cars and vans ever available.

As part of finalising the supplementary estimates for 2023, I made immediate funding available for the purchase of an additional 95 vehicles, comprising 17 public order vans, 38 new electric patrol cars, 40 unmarked surveillance cars and 10 community policing vans which are currently being prepared for deployment.

We have invested significantly in additional resources for Dublin city centre, a new station on O’Connell Street along with the re-opened Fitzgibbon Street.

I officially opened the on time and on budget Walter Scott House in November 2022 - this is a new building for a new generation of policing, adding capacity to An Garda Síochána to tackle crime with the most modern of facilities and technology.

And we opened a brand new, state of the art control centre for the Dublin Region in Heuston Station in May.

There is no excuse for the disgraceful scenes of violence we saw a fortnight ago.

We must be very clear about what followed the attack.

What we saw was the exploitation of an appalling incident to simply wreak havoc.

Those involved disturbed the scene of the previous shocking crime and diverted Garda resources away from investigating and dealing with that crime.

More than 400 members of An Garda Síochána were deployed on patrol in Dublin city centre, including front-line uniformed Gardaí, non-uniformed Gardaí and in excess of 250 public order Gardaí.

I commend each and every Garda on restoring order to our streets as quickly as they did and for their ongoing efforts to bring those responsible to justice.

A significant number of arrests have been made, and more than 30 people have already been before the courts.

The high-visibility Garda presence on the streets – this includes the four public order units – is being and will be maintained in Dublin for the foreseeable future.

Retailers and Community safety

I have listened to those who live in the city centre, and I have met community organisations and businesses, not just in Dublin but in Cork, Galway, Limerick, my own county and smaller towns and villages.

We have the most wonderful capital city.

The people who make up the very fabric of this city are the reason it is what it is.

I understand that every person in this city wants to feel safe and be safe and I know that this has not always been the case, because people have told me.

Last week I had a positive and constructive meeting with retailers in the city.

I heard about their experiences of working in the city centre, not just during the recent disturbances, but over the last number of years.

I am aware of the difficulties they face in dealing with repeat offenders who steal from their shops and the concerns of their staff members.

They recognised the impact that high-visibility policing is having.

€10 million in additional funding for overtime was allocated to Dublin city centre to complement the work of the 3,742 members who currently work in Dublin.

But they recognised that we cannot police ourselves out of this situation.

I have established a new community safety partnership in the north inner city to bring everyone around the table to focus on safety, and to make sure every voice is heard and no opinion is wasted.

Our Garda reforms have allowed us to establish dedicated community policing teams which are operating in the city centre, again building on the really strong link Gardaí have with their communities.

It has been a difficult few weeks, above all for the victims of the recent appalling attack, for their families and their community.

They remain at the forefront of my mind.

So too is the safety of the Irish people. All of my actions during my time in office have been with these people in mind, to make them safer, and feel safer.

I will continue working hard for a safe, fair and inclusive Ireland.

Thank you.