

GUARDING AGAINST VIOLENT CRIME IN DUBLIN CITY CENTRE

The Department of Justice has allocated €10 million in funding to increase police visibility on the streets of the capital, in response to the recent spate of violent attacks in Dublin. However, while the measure has been widely welcomed, it's also been viewed just as a short-term fix to what has become a much wider problem of escalating crime levels.
Report by Christine Maguire.

The Minister for Justice Helen McEntee has said that the allocation of €10 million to fund overtime in An Garda Síochána would “help with the Garda commitment to continue to protect Dublin communities and ensure that the city is a safe place for all to live, work and visit”.

The funding will be used to increase deployment of the Public Order Unit and enhance Operation Citizen, set up in 2021 to provide a visible Garda presence in the city centre. However, it is only enough to cover overtime hours until the end of the year.

The President of the Garda Representative Association (GRA), Brendan O'Connor, told *'Emergency Services Ireland'* that while the €10 million was a welcome step, he added that in many ways it was “a sticking plaster approach” to a much wider problem.

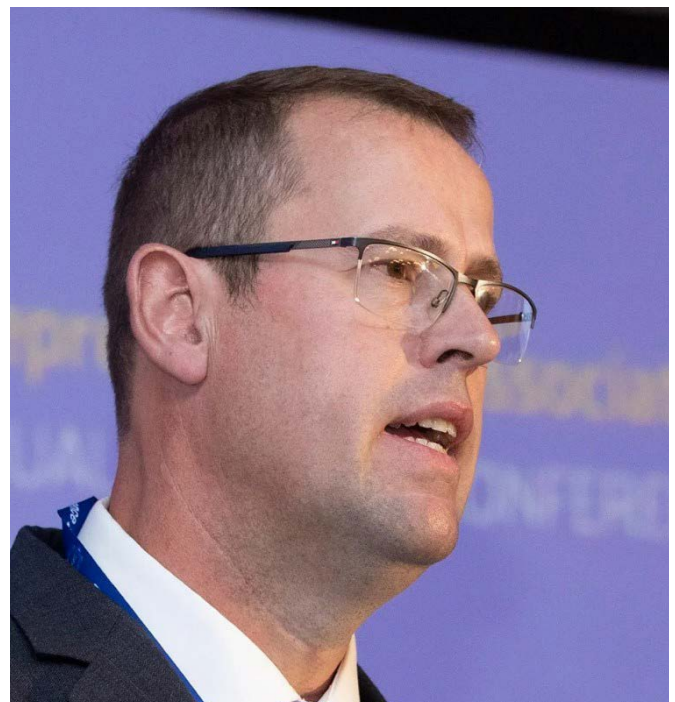
“Simply providing more funds is not the answer as it means that you then rely on the same Gardaí to work longer hours which ultimately leads to Garda burn-out and will have a significant effect on their already stressed work-life balance,” he said.

FALLING GARDA NUMBERS

Fine Gael Senator Regina Doherty told *'Emergency Services Ireland'*: “While the availability of extra funding is welcome, I think a far more pressing issue is Garda morale, falling numbers and difficulty in getting more people signed up to the force, despite recruitment drives.”

Ireland has the 12th lowest number of police per capita out of 33 European countries, with a total of 13,982 Gardaí in the country at the end of July. Staffing

figures show a 3.8% drop in the number working in the Dublin North Central Division – which includes Store Street, Mounjoy and Bridewell stations – since the start of 2023, the largest decrease in any division.



GRA President Brendan O'Connor described the €10m funding as “a sticking plaster approach to a much wider problem”.

“The failure to meet Garda recruitment targets, increasing resignations and a move towards more specialisation is likely to impact divisions like North Central where significant numbers of Garda trainees have traditionally began their careers,” O’Connor explained.

“It’s a high-demand busy city centre location where junior Gardaí traditionally learn their trade quickly with many transferring to different locations or utilising their expertise and experience in a more specialised field of policing.”

and retention crisis that is creating this void in our service to the public,” O’Connor said.

Gary Gannon, Social Democrats TD for Dublin Central, believes that people who want to stay in the force need to be incentivised. “It’s a vitally important job and you can’t continue to ask people to do the job on rosters that are not going to be very compatible with family life, on an income that would have you struggling to afford rent and very little prospect of a mortgage,” he pointed out to ‘Emergency Services Ireland’.

McEntee has said there is a “building momentum in recruitment” and that “100 new Gardaí have attested so far this year; another 470 will be in active training – and two more classes are due into Templemore in October and December”.

INNER CITY SAFETY PLAN

The Community Safety Plan for the North Inner City Local Community Safety Partnerships (LCSPs), which was released in September and is part of a pilot scheme set up in 2020, it calls for a strong Garda presence and the improvement of areas where drug dealing and anti-social behaviour occur.

Community wardens will patrol Wolfe Tone Square, O’Connell Street and surrounding streets to give an increased feeling of safety, the funding for which was announced last October. O’Connor said that the GRA welcomes any initiative that might enhance policing, especially when its members are under pressure, but noted the need to ensure they “complement quality policing and are not used as a substitute for properly trained Gardaí.”

“We have seen initiative after initiative tried in many jurisdictions but there really is no viable or cheaper alternative to a visible Garda presence, including permanently allocated full-time community policing units,” he said.



A multi-stakeholder tactical approach will improve the situation in Dublin city centre, which starts with targeting open drug dealing, notes Pat Leahy, former Assistant Garda Commissioner. (Pic: Collins Photos)

ROSTER RESISTANCE

The GRA’s vote of ‘No Confidence’ in Garda Commissioner Drew Harris, which was passed by a phenomenal and unprecedented 98.7% of rank-and-file members on 13 September, served to highlight the frustration felt by members about Harris’s planned return to the pre-Covid roster system of six days on, four days off instead of the current four days on, four days off rotation.

According to the GRA, there are not enough staff members to fill the rosters and that it will negatively affect their standard of life. It wants the Government and senior Garda management to take a more holistic approach to the overall decline in Garda numbers.

“Ask why we simply do not have enough Gardaí on the streets and genuinely tackle the recruitment



“Simply providing more funds is not the answer as it means that you then rely on the same Gardaí to work longer hours which ultimately leads to Garda burn-out ...”

- Brendan O'Connor, GRA President



Neasa Hourigan, Green Party TD for Dublin Central, has asked Minister McEntee to match the overtime funding with investment in the inner city. (Pic: <https://neasahourigan.com/>)

Former Assistant Garda Commissioner Pat Leahy told ‘Emergency Services Ireland’ that time will tell if the plan has the desired effect. “It’s not going to cure the lack of Gardaí on the street because it takes time for them to come through the pipeline,” he said. “Ultimately, the feeling of safety is enhanced double-quick time if people can see uniformed Guards on the beat engaging, interacting and that’s what makes people feel safe.”

Leahy stressed that a multi-stakeholder tactical approach is necessary to improve the situation in the city centre, which starts with targeting open drug dealing. “Then you bring in your Community Gardaí to engage with stakeholders to give them a feeling of safety, and to say ‘we’re on your side and we’re here to stay’.

“It’s not a short, sharp stick which is what they’re used to getting, whereby the Gardaí come in and then a couple of weeks later they’re gone and it’s back to normal. You

must have a long-term tactic.”

COMMUNITY POLICING AND INVESTMENT

According to Neasa Hourigan, Green Party TD for Dublin Central, the community safety plan is “disappointing and a hugely missed opportunity.” She has asked Minister McEntee to match the €10 million in overtime funding with investment in the inner city, requesting €6 million for Local Drug and Alcohol Task Forces and €2.5 million for sports, arts groups and community centres.

“Addressing the sources of these issues before they manifest as criminality and antisocial behaviour is better for communities, better for the people involved and a more effective use of Garda resources,” she said.

Meanwhile, Gary Gannon believes “a municipal form of policing that differentiates the city centre from the more residential parts of the inner city” is required in Dublin, as both require different styles of policing.

“In the city centre, I think we need a consistent Garda presence with increased manpower,” he said. “In terms of policing the residential parts of the inner city, and I see the two as very separate, I think we need to get back to the Small Area Policing, where Gardaí are encouraged to go and knock on people’s doors, introduce themselves and get to know the residents again.”

He added that sport is vital for building connections with young people, noting that none of the inner-city sports clubs that work with young people were involved in the safety plan. “It is a way of giving young men, young boys, teenagers who have the capacity for violence an



Gary Gannon, Social Democrats TD for Dublin Central, said that people who want to stay in the force need to be incentivized. (Pic: @GaryGannonTD on ‘X’)

outlet for which they can be reached on their level,” he said.

MINISTER’S LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES FOR DÁIL

During her address at the latest Garda graduation ceremony in Templemore in August, Minister McEntee outlined her legislative priorities for the autumn Dáil session to deliver on her policy agenda of building stronger, safer communities. These include:

- The rollout of bodycams for frontline Gardaí from early next year, which requires the enactment of the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Bill 2022.
- The national rollout of Community Safety Partnerships from next summer, which requires the enactment of the Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill.
- The establishment of the new statutory Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence Agency by January as a key part of the Zero Tolerance plan, which requires the enactment of legislation to establish the agency.

The Justice Minister said she also plans to introduce “tough new laws to ensure that communities have a real say in making their areas safer”. These include the recent enactment of legislation to increase the sentence for assault causing harm from five years to ten years, increase the maximum sentence for conspiracy to murder from ten years to life, and to increase the maximum sentence for assaults on Gardaí and emergency workers from 7 to 12 years.



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