

Enforcing law and order *Across Dublin's Fair City*



A former Assistant Garda Commissioner has said that it should not take a crisis, such as the violent riots in Dublin city centre late last year, for the force to be fully resourced to ensure that Gardaí get what they need. Amid calls for a permanent public order unit and other measures, what policing proposals are now in the pipeline for the future? Report by Christine Maguire.

In the wake of the violent riots that ignited in Dublin city centre last November, the Department of Justice and the Commissioner faced major criticism and were under serious pressure to take action in a bid to ensure that frontline workers are prepared and protected in the event of similar incidents in the future.

During the violence that unfolded in the aftermath of the stabbing of three children and a creche worker on Parnell Street on 23 November 2023, Dublin City Council estimates almost €20m worth of damage was done.

A Luas and a bus were set on fire, shops were looted, Garda cars were destroyed and numerous Gardaí were injured, with 12 assaults involving an injured Garda recorded in the PULSE system that night.

Garda Commissioner Drew Harris, who has said he will not resign amid

calls for him to step down, told the Oireachtas justice committee on November 29 that following the violence in the city centre, additional personal safety equipment would be purchased and more Gardaí would get public order training, in addition to the 100 added to the public order unit in Dublin this year.

There are plans for all Gardaí to be armed with stronger incapacitant (pepper) spray, which was previously only given to public order, armed support and emergency response units. Public order unit Gardaí are to be issued with 200 tasers – “subject to successful training and accreditation,” Harris said.

Former Assistant Garda Commissioner Dr Jack Nolan told ‘Emergency Services Ireland’ that the riots have been met with a “tough” response, including “the borrowing

Calls for a 'get tough' approach need to be balanced and Garda numbers must be significantly enhanced, operationally, in terms of capacity, numbers, resources and equipment - Dr Jack Nolan

of two water cannons from the PSNI, the plans to buy our own water cannons," the proposed issuing of tasers, "facial recognition technology being introduced and a whole package of other measures."

However, he said that the "calls for a 'get tough' approach have to be balanced" and added that Garda numbers must be "significantly enhanced, operationally, in terms of capacity, numbers, resources and equipment".

REVIEW OF TRAINING TACTICS

Harris has denied accusations that control of the streets was lost during the riots, saying that order was restored within hours. He claimed that in other capital cities, similar situations had seen normal society "shut down for days".

The Garda Representative Association (GRA) and the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors (AGSI) met with Commissioner Harris in the wake of the violence. The GRA called for a review of training tactics, claiming that Gardaí had been isolated during the rioting.

It also noted the distinct lack of specialist helmets on the night, and when Gardaí from as far as Waterford responded to calls for assistance, there was a shortage of transport to bring them to the city. The suitability of trainee Gardaí reportedly being sent to the riots was also raised.

The Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors (AGSI) severely condemned the violence displayed during the riots in Dublin City Centre. AGSI General Secretary

Antoinette Cunningham stated shortly after the riots, "We are seriously concerned for the safety of our members working in such violent, stressful and dangerous conditions."

PUBLIC ORDER POLICING

Mark Toland, Chief Inspector of An Garda Síochána Inspectorate, told 'Emergency Services Ireland' said that while it was not appropriate to comment in relation to the specific incident at that time, he added that the Garda Inspectorate at the request of the Policing Authority completed an inspection in 2019 into the effectiveness of public order policing by the Garda Síochána.

"This inspection made a total of 19 recommendations for the Garda Síochána, and the Inspectorate continues to monitor the implementation of these recommendations." A review of the report in May 2023 found nine recommendations had been implemented and actions were being taken for the remaining ten.

These included mandatory recertification for all public service commanders to ensure they maintain operational competence, professional knowledge and an understanding of human rights issues; the development of an effective authorisation for deploying public order units for spontaneous public order incidents; and the adoption of a wider definition of "critical incident" that recognises the risk to confidence in policing and which should be embedded into operational practice.

PERMANENT PUBLIC ORDER UNIT

Amid calls from opposition politicians for her resignation, Minister for Justice Helen McEntee said the Garda response to the riots was "excellent". After surviving a vote of 'no confidence' in the Dáil, she told an Oireachtas Justice Committee meeting on 11 December 2023 that 400 Gardaí were deployed in Dublin city centre that night, including 250 public order Gardaí.

However, according to Nolan, there had been no mention that members of the Garda public order unit, drawn from regular policing units, had to go back to their stations, to [the stores in] Santry to get their equipment during the riots.

"That is because Ireland doesn't have its own permanent public order unit. Many other countries have permanent public order units," he added, saying that Ireland's lack of one was perhaps because "we didn't have a need for it". He explained that the Gardaí usually deal with protests and the like using a soft cap approach,



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where gardaí are in their regular uniforms and try to engage with protesters. It's only when things escalate that they respond with force. "It looks as if there's been a change of mindset," he said.

"A permanent public order unit would be a positive step," Nolan said. When asked what the unit would do when there are no incidents to respond to, he suggested it could be used as a presence in the city centre, and to conduct "late-night public order patrols."

The Justice Minister has promised a "strong, visible Garda presence" in the city going forward, and has asked the Policing Authority to look at how gardaí can receive additional support and to provide clarity about the level of force they can use.

Months before the riots took place, she announced the allocation of €10 million to fund Garda overtime to increase police presence in the city centre up to the end of 2023. This was in response to increased violence in the capital; however, it was seen as a short-term measure that didn't address the issues of falling garda numbers and morale within the force.

'SEMINAL MOMENT IN POLICING'

Nolan believes the events of 23 November 2023 could be a "seminal moment in policing." "If we look back at history, there have been several seminal moments in policing - the shooting of Veronica Guerin, for example. Legislation [the 1996 Crime Act and Criminal Assets Bureau Act] was enacted within five to six weeks of her death," he told 'Emergency Services Ireland'.

"It was the same 10 years later when Roy Collins was



Dublin City Council estimates note that almost €20m worth of damage was done on the night of the riots.

shot in Limerick," he added, which spurred a crackdown on feuding gangs and increased armed Garda Regional Support Units (RSU) on the streets and led to The Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act that allowed gang-related offences to be sent to the Special Criminal Court to be heard without a jury present.

Legislation allowing gardaí to use bodycams, the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Act 2023, was signed into law on 5 December 2023. Bodycams are now due to be rolled out from next spring, starting in Dublin city centre.



Shops in Dublin's north inner city were looted during the violence that unfolded in the aftermath of the stabbing of three children and a creche worker on Parnell Street on 23 November 2023.

Draft Facial recognition technology (FRT) legislation is also to be expanded to include usage for riots and violent disorder. Opponents of FRT cite privacy concerns, racial bias and the risk of it being used without warranted suspicion. McEntee said it will only be “permitted retrospectively” and that it will save Gardaí having to trawl through CCTV footage, “12,000 hours in the case of the Dublin riots”.

GARDA ‘SOFT POLICING’ CRITICISED

Harris said the Gardaí would also evolve their tactics in dealing with the far-right element. The Gardaí’s non-confrontational approach has been criticised and questions have also been raised about how they appeared unprepared for the events that night despite there being chatter about it on ‘X’ and Telegram, which they monitor.

At a meeting between senior Garda management and public service workers from Fórsa at the start of November, Gardaí had said they would review their policing of far-right protests.

However, Ireland’s second largest trade union criticised what it said was the “soft policing” of protests at libraries, migrant

centres and outside the Dail, saying it wasn’t working. “The unprecedented allocation of €2.3 billion to An Garda Síochána for 2024 demonstrates the Government’s commitment to ensuring the force has provision for the equipment, technology, facilities, fleet and personnel it needs to carry out vital policing work,” McEntee said in a Dail debate on 12 December 2023.

She also announced €4.4 million in funding 95 extra Garda vehicles, in addition to 10 high visibility community policing vans prepared for deployment.

“However, it shouldn’t take a crisis for police to be fully resourced,” Nolan said, adding that “a lack of finance shouldn’t be an obstacle” to ensuring the Gardaí get what they need, particularly given the country’s current public finances.

“Other countries with similar populations have a larger police presence,” he pointed out. “If we look at Scotland as an example of a country of a similar size, they have far more police and support staff than we do. Denmark and Norway are other countries with similar liberal democratic constitutional systems and larger police forces.”

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