

AN GARDA SÍOCHÁNA OPENING STATEMENT TO
JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS
WEDNESDAY 15 MAY 2024

Chairman, Committee members, Good Afternoon.

Thank you for the invitation to attend here today to discuss this very important issue.

I am joined today by Assistant Commissioner Paula Hilman, who has responsibility for Roads Policing and Community Engagement within An Garda Síochána.

Let me begin by saying that I share your deep concern in respect of the current level of road traffic fatalities, and I want to reassure you and the public that An Garda Síochána remains committed to road safety and to reducing the number of fatalities on our roads.

To date, 72 people have lost their lives on Irish roads this year. Their families are grieving and missing a loved one, their lives changed forever.

To those families I would like to extend my deepest sympathies, and I want to reiterate that for An Garda Síochána, any death on our roads is one too many.

This is why road safety is a matter we take very seriously, and we are committed to working with our partners and communities to ensure our roads are a safer place for all.

We want to acknowledge that we cannot solve this alone, and we continue to work in partnership with the Road Safety Authority and with other statutory bodies and inter-agency partners to strengthen our collaboration and to achieve Vision Zero under the Road Safety Strategy 2021 to 2030.

As you will know, the Road Safety Strategy Phase 1 Action Plan (2021-2024) involves 186 actions for delivery by the partners to the strategy under the seven safe system priority intervention areas: safe roads and roadsides, safe speeds, safe vehicles, safe road use, post-crash response, safe and healthy modes of travel, and safe work-related road use.

While it is to be acknowledged that we are facing pressures in terms of resourcing across An Garda Síochána, I want to reassure this committee and the public, that there is certainly no organisational policy to reduce numbers in our Roads Policing Units.

As Garda recruitment continues and accelerates, additional Garda members are becoming available and are being deployed to priority areas.

We plan to add 75 Gardaí to Roads Policing this year and a further 75 in 2025. And working towards this, we are proactively recruiting into our Roads Policing Units. Currently, we have advertised a competition for new allocations to Roads Policing Units in the Eastern, North-Western and Southern Regions. Meanwhile, allocations to Roads Policing Units in the Dublin region have already commenced from an existing panel.

In recognition of the upward trend in road fatalities, we are also implementing a number of key measures which have proven success in curbing poor driver behaviour.

This includes the recent road traffic enforcement measure which calls for 30 minutes of high visibility roads policing duty during every uniform tour of duty. This has had the effect of increasing Garda visibility which, in turn, works to moderate driver and road user behaviour, as well as increase enforcement.

In the first four weeks of the 30-minute operation, which commenced on the 12th of April, we saw increases in detections based on a comparable period in March.

This included a 55% increase in fixed charge notices being issued for Mobile Phone use (2,148 issued); a 40% increase in the number of breath tests conducted at MIT checkpoints (19,100 in total); a 17% increase in those detected driving under the influence (736 incidents); and led to a 30% increase in the number of vehicles seized under Section 41 of the Road Traffic Acts as amended (3,111 vehicles).

All frontline members of An Garda Síochána, even those outside of full time roads policing units, have a role to play in the enforcement of road traffic legislation and do so on a daily basis.

For instance, in 2023, non-roads policing allocated personnel were responsible for 70% of Driving under the Influence detections and 24.5% of the enforcement of Mobile Phone, Seatbelt and Speeding offences.

This latest initiative has been introduced and adapted from the highly successful Swedish Road Safety Strategy. Their 'Vision Zero' strategy has successfully halved the number of deaths on Swedish roads since the turn of the millennium.

By using this model towards roads policing in Sweden, research has shown that the presence of a police officer in a visible position for a period of 30 minutes collectively alters driver behaviour and reduces speed, which in turn plays a vital role in reducing fatal or serious injury road traffic collisions.

We are all aware that speed kills, but just to provide some context to this, it has been shown that if a pedestrian is struck by a vehicle travelling at 50km/hour, they have a 50% chance of surviving the collision. However, that reduces significantly to just 10% if they are struck by a vehicle travelling at 60km/hour. So this small change in speed can and does have a huge impact.

In relation to our enforcement activity in this area, we have issued 45,951 fixed charge notices for speeding so far this year [up to 9th of May 2024].

Of those, approximately 70% were detected via the use of mobile safety cameras.

There are currently 55 mobile safety cameras operational nationwide. This is set to increase to 58 in the coming weeks. Meanwhile, following the successful roll-out of two average speed safety camera systems on the N7 and at the Dublin Port Tunnel, three more will be added in Quarter 3 of this year along the N3, N5 and N2.

Working from our own Garda budget, we will supplement the existing mobile safety cameras and average speed cameras with new static safety cameras, which will begin being installed along nine national routes in other locations across the country in Quarter 4 of this year.

These nine static speed cameras will cost approximately €2.4 million over the next 18 months. Their locations have been selected based on fatal and serious injury collision data from the last seven years and speed data, as well as feedback from stakeholders.

But looking beyond that, I have requested that Assistant Commissioner Hilman develop a business case for the introduction of a further substantial increase in static speed cameras. This business case will then form part of An Garda Síochána's application for its overall funding in 2025 as part of the Estimates Process.

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge that Garda members have been working hard in the area of Road Safety and we are seeing the impact of this in terms of our enforcement statistics and also in the development and expansion of our education activities within communities.

We have issued 7,557 fixed charge notices in respect of mobile phone use so far this year. This again is about reminding the public that it only takes a split second for the unthinkable to happen, and that it is essential that drivers keep their eyes on the road at all times and stay alert.

As of 9th of May 2024, there were 2,870 incidents of driving whilst intoxicated (under the influence of alcohol or drugs). Since the introduction of the Securetec® Drugwipe in December 2022, An Garda Síochána now has better capabilities to detect drug driving. The Drugwipe test is not only portable but delivers faster results, and it works to detect the presence of Cannabis, Cocaine, Benzodiazepines, Opiates, Amphetamine and Methamphetamine.

Based on last year's data, we have seen that drug driving detections account for over one third of driving while intoxicated detections.

This test is one of the many advances that have been made to support Gardaí in their roads policing efforts. We have also improved our road side breath test devices; have improved speed detection equipment; and we have increased the number of ANPR (Automated Number Plate Recognition) equipped vehicles.

In addition, An Garda Síochána has deployed enhanced SMART policing technologies. For instance, all frontline Gardaí can now issue Fixed Charge Notices and check vehicle data, person data and insurance data directly through their personal mobility device on the side of the road.

Since the introduction of the insurance data app on mobility devices, we have seen a steady increase in the number of vehicles detained where the reason included no insurance, with 6,675 vehicles detained this year

to the 9th May 2024. This represents a 70% increase on the same period in 2023, when 3,936 vehicles were detained where the reason included no insurance.

Of course, for our roads to be safe, we cannot solely rely on enforcement. A more complete approach that incorporates education and the engineering of both roads and vehicles is crucial to addressing road safety concerns.

We recognise that educating people of all ages has the potential to help keep more people safe on or near our roads. To that end, we actively engage in workplace briefings, deliver road safety talks in schools and third level institutions, as well as delivering primary schools and transition year road safety programmes.

Further to this activity, An Garda Síochána rolled out the ‘Lifesaver Project’ nationally in October 2023. This is a hard hitting interactive road Safety talk which can be delivered to school groups, industry professionals, or community groups and highlights the impact of road traffic collisions.

We continue to carry out high profile ‘days of action’, such as our recent National Slow Down Day, which work to highlight and promote road safety.

And we utilise communications tools such as our social media channels and our flagship TV programme Crimecall to highlight road traffic enforcement and safety advice to the public.

In April, we launched a series of TikTok videos which focussed on distracted driving and to date this series has received 2.8 million views. Of those who engaged with the series, almost 44% were aged between 18 and 34; and a further 25% were aged between 35 to 44.

To conclude,

I want to take this opportunity to advise anyone getting behind the wheel of any vehicle today to consider carefully how your actions could impact others. I urge you to please slow down, put the phones away and give your full attention to the road.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.