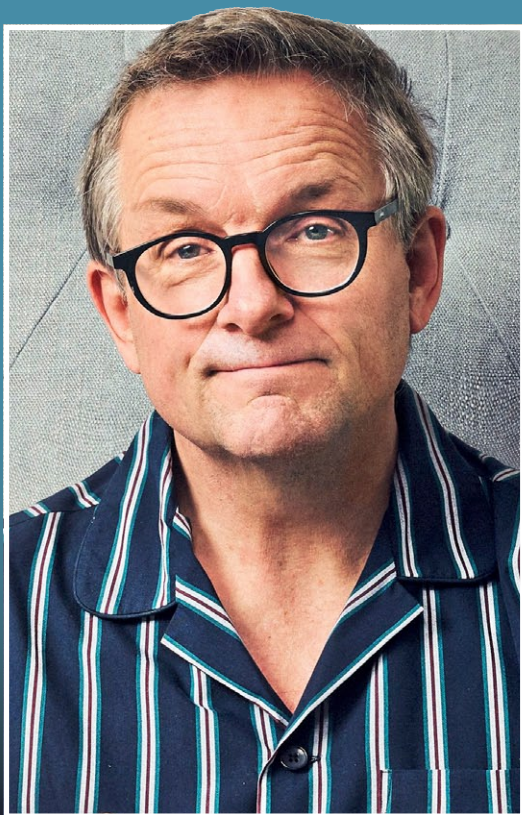




What the Queen thought of Diana

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EXCLUSIVE: Explosive letter reveals Horkans' 'blunt' questions to Commissioner Harris about unsafe holsters issued by HQ ...

FAMILY OF SLAIN GARDA DEMAND ANSWERS

THE devastated family of murdered Detective Colm Horkan have demanded answers from Garda Commissioner Drew Harris about what he knew about defective gun holsters before the high-profile kill-

By John Lee

GROUP POLITICAL EDITOR

ing of the serving officer, who was shot dead with his own firearm.

The family sent legal correspondence

to Commissioner Harris a month after the Irish Mail on Sunday revealed how a whistleblower warned management that Garda-issued holsters were 'not fit for purpose'

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Dee Forbes's regret at her return to Ireland

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Horkan family tell 'blunt' response is

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before tragedies that led to the death of Detective Horkan and left another officer with life-changing injuries.

Solicitors representing the family told the Commissioner they 'are entitled to know precisely what the Garda Authorities knew about the equipment Garda Horkan was wearing on the date of his murder and whether that equipment contributed to the circumstances surrounding his death'.

Detective Horkan was murdered by convicted killer Stephen Silver, who shot the plain-clothes garda 11 times with his own weapon after disarming him in Castlereagh, Co. Roscommon on June 17, 2020.

Silver was sentenced to a minimum of 40 years in prison last April after he was found guilty of the capital murder of the serving officer.

Nine months before Detective Horkan's murder, a Garda whistleblower raised serious concerns about holsters issued with automatic pistols used by gardaí in separate protected disclosures to management and the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Office (GSOC).

In the disclosures, the whistle-

'Our clients are entitled to know the truth'

blower said the holsters were 'not fit for purpose'.

Holsters specifically designed for the 9mm Sig Sauer P229 and Walther guns make it impossible for an assailant to take the weapons or for them to fire accidentally.

On June 11 – just six days before Detective Horkan's killing – another garda on protective duty outside the Israeli Embassy in Ballsbridge, Dublin, sustained 'life-changing' injuries when his Walther pistol discharged accidentally.

Both officers were carrying their pistols in leather holsters made by a supplier which the whistleblower – a firearms expert – claimed were not approved by the gun's manufacturers.

In response to queries about the holsters, a Garda spokesperson told the MoS: 'A tender process for firearms accessories concluded in September 2020. This process resulted in a new supplier of holsters being retained by An Garda Síochána.'

Commissioner Harris has categorically stated he was not made aware of the whistleblower's warnings about the holsters.

However, the family of the murdered garda is now demanding answers from the Garda chief about what exactly he knew about defects in the official Garda equipment prior to his killing.

The legal correspondence to Commissioner Harris – seen by the MoS – states: 'Our clients are entitled to know precisely what the Garda



TRAGIC: Detective Garda Horkan's funeral and, left, his father Marty outside court last April

FOUR QUESTIONS THAT HERO GARDA'S FAMILY WANT ANSWERED...

- 1** WAS DETECTIVE Garda Horkan wearing the holster which you knew – or ought to have known – was the subject of complaints and/or a protected disclosure?
- 2** IF SO, when were you, your servants or agents, made aware of these complaints?
- 3** IF SO, what steps were taken to investigate these complaints and when were those steps taken?
- 4** IF SO, what, if any, contribution did that make, or relevance did that have, to the circumstances surrounding the murder of Detective Garda Horkan and his murderer's access to the firearm which was used as the weapon of murder?

Authorities knew about the equipment Garda Horkan was wearing on the date of his murder and whether that equipment contributed to the circumstances surrounding his death.

'They are entitled to know whether concerns were, or were not, acted upon.'

Referring to the earlier revelations in the MoS and from responses to follow-up questions to Commissioner Harris, the letter goes on to state that the family is aware from 'reporting and from questions put to you at the Policing Authority in November 2023, that there are concerns relating to the official issue holster for the firearm which Garda Horkan was issued: the weapon which was ultimately used by his murderer.'

Referring to comments made by Mr Harris at a Policing Authority hearing in November in response to questions from the MoS, in which the Commissioner said: 'To be blunt,

Colm Horkan in the execution of his duties was murdered, so that is where the crime actually lies,' the family's solicitor said: 'Allow us also to be blunt, Commissioner, this response is not adequate.'

The letter adds: 'It [the Commissioner's response] does not deal with the question of responsibility for the surrounding circum-

'You are responsible for safety of equipment'

stances, and it does not address whether or not you failed one of your serving Garda members as the leader of the organisation with responsibility for that member's safety at work.'

The legal correspondence also reminded Mr Harris he told the Policing Authority he was 'not

aware of these earlier complaints', but that he had 'directed that those holsters be replaced with a modern holster' after Detective Horkan's murder.

The family, through its solicitor, told the Garda chief: 'The foregoing response belies the fact that these complaints had been made and that, therefore, the potential risk was known to the Garda authorities.'

In one hard-hitting passage, the correspondence tells the Garda Commissioner: 'You are responsible for the organisation and the safety of the equipment provided to its members and it would be false, erroneous and indeed improper for you to seek to absolve yourself of that responsibility.'

The opening of legal correspondence between Detective Horkan's family and the Commissioner could have serious ramifications for An Garda Síochána and Justice Minister Helen McEntee.

Shortly after her appointment in

STATE WAS WARNED OF DANGERS OF GARDA HOLSTERS

'NOT FIT FOR PURPOSE':
Our exclusive front page story from November 5

How the MoS

GARDA Commissioner Drew Harris previously admitted to the Irish Mail on Sunday that he personally directed the withdrawal of the force's gun holsters following the murder of Detective Colm Horkan.

However, he said he was not made aware of warnings by a Garda whistleblower about the holsters in protected disclosures to gardaí. Last November, the MoS revealed that the whistleblower told management

August 2020, the whistleblower made a further disclosure to Ms McEntee in relation to the defective gun holsters.

The holsters were replaced the following month.

Last November, the whistleblower reiterated his concerns in a letter his legal representatives sent to Ms McEntee.

The letter outlined how, on September 9, 2019, the whistleblower met members of the Garda Ombudsman Commission at the Stillorgan Park Hotel in Dublin, where he outlined his concerns about the safety of the HQ-issued holsters alongside other issues.

Last November, the Garda ombudsman confirmed it launched

Commissioner his just not 'adequate'



WHO'S TO BLAME? MoS coverage of Mr Harris's response to questions about the garda's murder

helped prompt family's queries

By Aisling Moloney

and the Garda watchdog that the holsters were 'not fit for purpose' before tragedies led to the death of Detective Horkan and left an officer with life-changing injuries.

Asked the following week if he had failed Detective Horkan, Mr Harris told the MoS: 'I'm not aware of these earlier complaints, but I was aware

obviously of the nature of the holster and the type of holster we had on issue, and following the murder of Colm Horkan I directed that those be replaced with a modern holster which has effective foam brick, which prevents its easy removal.'

Asked if he hadn't failed Detective Horkan, then who had, Mr Harris replied, 'Colm Horkan, in the execution of his duty, was murdered, so that is where the crime actually lies'.

When it was pointed out that the holster issue was raised with the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, Mr Harris said these warnings did not reach his office.

'None of that crossed my desk on those proceeding nine months,' he said at the time.

This response has been included in the solicitor's letter sent to Mr Harris.

an investigation into the defective holsters in June-July 2020 in the wake of Detective Horkan's murder and the incident outside the Israeli Embassy. But this was a full nine months after the whistleblower first raised his concerns with the watchdog. In response to queries from the MoS this weekend, a Garda spokesperson said: 'In general, An Garda Síochána does not comment on private correspondence from third-parties.'

The spokesperson also said the force does not comment on 'GSOC investigations', 'any matters subject of protected disclosures' or 'matters before

the courts'. They added: 'In November 2023 at the Oireachtas Justice Committee and at a separate media briefing, Commissioner Harris said

'Weapon ultimately used by his murderer'

that following the murder of Detective Garda Colm Horkan, as Commissioner he directed that a new safety holster be introduced.

'This new safety holster for An Garda Síochána was

procured following a tender process for firearms accessories that concluded in September 2020. This process resulted in a new supplier of holsters being retained by An Garda Síochána.

'This new safety holster makes it more difficult for a firearm to be removed.'

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TOP COP: Drew Harris ordered new safety holsters

Exodus from force to hit new record as morale slumps

By Debbie McCann

CRIME CORRESPONDENT

GARDAÍ are continuing to quit the force in large numbers and figures indicate the record resignations of 2023 will be surpassed this year.

In the first three weeks of January alone 17 officers tendered their resignations and notices to quit.

This follows a record high of 169 resignations last year, 50% higher than the 107 who resigned in 2022, and more than six times higher than the number in 2016.

The latest figures come as the Government and An Garda Síochána continue efforts to boost the number of serving gardaí.

At the end of 2023, there were 13,998 gardaí in the service – more than 1,000 fewer the Government's target of 15,000.

Gardaí are now targeting older applicants to swell their ranks, and the latest recruitment drive launched last month increased the maximum age for applicants from 35 to 50.

A €400,000 advertising campaign for the recruitment competition is running across national and local media, online and social media – with efforts being made to target Irish people living in the UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

But despite the resolution of the Garda roster row – which followed an unprecedented 99% vote of no confidence in Garda Commissioner Drew Harris among rank-and-file officers – the continuing exodus of serving officers indicates the force is still battling morale issues.

In response to parliamentary queries from Labour TD Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, Justice Minister Helen McEntee recently confirmed that 169 gardaí resigned last year but she said 746 trainees who entered the Garda Training College in Templemore last year was the highest intake since 2018.

She also said the rising number of trainees, 'will help ensure a steady pipeline on recruits entering Templemore in the near future'.

Informed sources this weekend said 'no one in the job is surprised' that resignations have continued in numbers previously unseen, and that morale continues to be a 'huge issue'.

Research by the Garda Representative Association (GRA) last year

found 99% of gardaí who resigned over the last two years said their mental health had suffered since joining. All former members interviewed, as part of the survey, reported a 'serious issue with morale'.

Almost three quarters of those who resigned cited unfair treatment and bullying as a reason for leaving, while 70% reported a fear of discipline affecting their decision-making.

Former members said they were 'terrified' of the Garda Ombudsman, suffered 'constant fear and anxiety' and received 'no support from Garda management'.

Forty out of around 200 gardaí who resigned from July 2021 to June 2023 took part in the research, which was conducted by the GRA to understand why so many officers were quitting the force.

Complaints made by former gardaí included 'horrendous working conditions', 'outdated systems' and 'rodent infested stations'. An overwhelming 85% of exiting officers claimed they did not have the resources or working conditions to do their jobs effectively.

A third reported a 'toxic' work environment, saying 'more people' were needed, while a quarter said a 'better' training is needed to improve officers' ability to work effectively.

Half of gardaí who left told the GRA they did not feel they had the necessary training to be effective in their role.

Exiting gardaí also complained about feeling 'burnt out, stressed, victimised and unsupported in their roles'.

Many said they felt 'weighed down by heavy and bureaucratic systems'. All of those surveyed said their personal life and mental health improved after leaving the force.

The interviews were conducted by the assistant to the General Secretary of the GRA, Tara McManus, who said the personal accounts 'provided invaluable insights into the reality of policing, particularly for our younger members who statistically, are more likely to resign'.

She added: 'They have described a worrying work culture where bullying, mental stress and burnout, and a sense of vulnerability are rife.'

'They have described feeling undervalued and overworked, and overwhelmingly, describe morale as being at an all-time low within the Garda organisation.'