

EXCLUSIVE: Gardaí were woefully underprepared for incident

By John Lee

GROUP POLITICAL EDITOR

GARDAÍ were unprepared to deal with a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack (CBRN) for at least a five-year period, the garda whose job it was to ensure the force's ability to respond has claimed in a protected disclosure.

In the latest of a series of damning disclosures, the Garda whistleblower claims not a single member of the Garda National Technical Bureau (GNTB) was trained or recertified to investigate a potential CBRN event and that repeated requests between 2019 and 2023 to Garda management for vital training, recertification and 'equipment in the form of personal protective equipment (PPE)' fell on deaf ears.

Remarkably, that timeline was in the aftermath of the March 2018 Novichok poisonings in Salisbury, England, an incident which the senior serving garda directly refers to in his disclosure.

This Garda whistleblower is a separate whistleblower to a former garda who previously told the MoS that Garda management were aware of a defective standard issue holster before the fatal shooting of Det Garda Colm Horkan.

'A complete lack of preparedness'

In a fresh series of protected disclosures he tells the MoS:

■ Guns previously seized by gardaí were used in a sting operation and delivered to men, who were subsequently arrested for possession of the firearms with gardaí telling the court the origin of the guns had not yet been established;

■ Internal revelations about the retention of fingerprint data raised by senior gardaí were withheld in a Department of Justice response to a parliamentary question from a Fianna Fáil TD;

■ Around 17,000 fingerprint records that were supposed to be retained vanished from Garda databases;

■ Commissioner Drew Harris allowed the mass retention of biometric (fingerprint) data without the legal authority to do so;

■ 4,500 DNA samples were lost by An Garda Síochána, more than twice the 2,000 figure previously thought to have vanished.

Much of these claims were previously made to the whistleblower's Garda superiors, the Department of Justice, and a legal firm.

In his disclosure, the whistleblower writes: 'There is a complete lack of preparedness and resilience by An Garda Síochána to deal with attacks or other mass casualty events involving Chemical, Biological, Radiological & Nuclear (CBRN) agents.'

The senior garda notes: 'The public need only look to the United Kingdom, to see how agents operating on behalf of foreign security services have previously deployed chemical and biological agents, such as the Novichok binary chemical nerve agent, for the purposes of conducting State-sponsored assassinations.'

The whistleblower warns risks from CBRN agents 'can [also] arise as a result of an accident

Damning disclosure alleges a shocking attack risk

'GARDAÍ DELIVERED GUNS TO MEN, THEN ARRESTED THEM'

A GARDA whistleblower has claimed that gardaí conducted a secret sting operation to supply individuals, who had expressed a desire to acquire guns online, with previously seized firearms.

The claim in a protected disclosure to the MoS raises serious concerns about a potential miscarriage of justice if the provenance of the guns is not disclosed in open court.

The disclosure by a senior serving garda officer raises the possibility that a court was misled, after a judge asked if it had been established where the guns had come from, and was told that was still being investigated.

The disclosure, the edited and redacted contents of which can be read on the next page, reads:

'[REDACTED] men, aged in their [REDACTED], who were arrested in early [REDACTED] in regard to the alleged importation and possession of firearms were actually supplied with the firearms and ammunition by garda management.'

'...Firearms already in the possession of An Garda Síochána... were delivered to [REDACTED] males from [REDACTED] in order for the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau (GNDOCB), with the likely assistance of other specialist units to arrest the unsuspecting...men with an interest in firearms.'

'It is understood the [REDACTED] men in question had gone online to enquire about

firearms. Their activity was picked up on by a foreign intelligence service who, via established intelligence channels, alerted An Garda Síochána as to the online presence of the [REDACTED] men and their inquisitiveness regarding firearms.'

'It is understood that the [REDACTED] men... were not previously known to gardaí in a criminal context and nor were they associated with criminal or subversive groups.'

He later adds: 'Despite GNDOCB knowing the real provenance of the firearms and ammunition in question, it is understood the court was advised... that the provenance of the weapons was not yet known...'

In response to queries regarding

GARDA WHISTLEBLOWER 1

■ NINE months before the murder of Det Garda Colm Horkan the whistleblower, who worked at Garda Firearms Stores, warned Garda management of safety concerns over Garda standard issue gun holsters.

■ Mismanagement of firearms at Garda HQ including allegations of automatic firearms, ammunition and explosives being kept in a shipping container at HQ without any proper tracing system, or health and safety contingencies. It was allegedly secured only by a combination padlock.

■ Among claims in Whistleblower 1's dossier was that an Olympic air pistol had been purchased with Garda funds for use by the child of a garda.

■ A garda took possession of valuable firearms – earmarked for destruction at the force's HQ – to sell for profit.

GARDA WHISTLEBLOWER 2

■ A second, more senior Garda whistleblower backs up a lot of what the first whistleblower has claimed regarding corporate knowledge of the defective holsters and the Garda HQ arms dump. His disclosures claim that Garda management withheld murdered Detective Garda Colm Horkan's defective gun holster from the control of forensic officers charged with investigating the crime.

■ A first person account of his attendance at the incident room at Castlereagh Garda station in the hours after Detective Garda Colm Horkan's murder where he was told that Det Gda Horkan's murderer, Stephen Silver, initially told investigators he had pulled the slain garda's gun from his holster.

■ Details of an investigation into initial claims by Whistleblower 1 of purchase of air pistol for child of a garda.

occurring in an industrial setting. It is understood that, despite the inclusion of these issues as a significant risk on the Garda National Technical Bureau (GNTB) Divisional Risk Register, and despite numerous applications from the Acting Head of the GNTB (from 2019 to 2023), for the recertification of GNTB members and the urgent replacement of the CBRN suits and respirators on issue to those members, that no such recertification or replacement suits

were provided.' Yesterday, the Garda Press Office tacitly confirmed the claim relating to the force's preparedness for a potential CBRN attack on Irish soil by saying that training had taken place and equipment bought 'within the last 12 months'.

A spokesman said: 'Specialist firearms officers have upskilled in CBRN tactics and methods within the last 12 months. An Garda Síochána have also invested significantly in buying CBRN equipment

in the last year. A large cohort of Gardaí have been trained as CBRN first responders.'

'As part of the inter-agency Framework for Major Emergency Management, An Garda Síochána has contributed to, and where relevant, led a series of inter-agency CBRN training exercises and scenario planning sessions in the last number of years.'

This response confirms that armed response units have been trained but makes no direct denial

of the claim that forensic investigators of hazardous scenes have not been certified.

Last night, Labour Justice Spokesman Alan Kelly, who has received protected disclosures from the whistleblower and has raised issues in Dáil Éireann, told the MoS: 'It is very telling that An Garda Síochána claim that they have only initiated preparation for attacks involving Chemical, Biological, Radiological & Nuclear in the last 12 months.'

such as killer Novichok poisonings



PROTECTED:
First responders
wore biohazard
suits to deal with
the Salisbury
Novichok attack

'These belated claims of preparations only come after this respected garda's highlighting this shocking absence of preparation.

'It remains the case that nothing was done about CBRN for most of Drew Harris's tenure,' he added.

The senior officer also alleges that, between the beginning of Commissioner Harris's tenure in 2018 up to April 2023, 'he continued to allow the mass retention of biometric (fingerprint) data and the associated personal data of the biometric donors, without the legal authority to do so.'

The protected disclosure notes that, under the Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database System) Act, An Garda Síochána is legally obliged to apply strict retention and destruction requirements to fingerprint data similar to obligations around DNA samples and profiles.

The whistleblower also claims 'a deliberate intent to obscure the Head of GNTB's concerns' were made in an official response to a parliamentary question about the collection of biometric data made in 2019 by former

Fianna Fáil TD Lisa Chambers to then justice minister Charlie Flanagan. In his initial response to Ms Chambers, the whistleblower who was tasked with compiling information for the PQ, wrote the force 'may be operating outside of the legislative parameters and potentially being in breach of Article 8 ECHR [European Court of Human Rights]'

That reference was omitted from the formal response, but the whistleblower does not know if it was Department of Justice officials or Garda management who excluded this information. In response to these claims, a Garda spokesman reiterated that they cannot comment on protected disclosures or 'ongoing investigations being carried out by either An Garda Síochána or Fiosrú.

'In general, certain matters raised by you have been attended to and discussed by An Garda Síochána with the relevant oversight bodies.

'An Garda Síochána note allegations in your enquiry made against a named individual's which are inaccurate. In general terms, when a Parliamentary Question is received from the Department of Justice for answer by An Garda Síochána, the question asked is researched across all relevant sections within An Garda Síochána.

'Parliamentary Questions are not answered by individual members of An Garda Síochána. Following this research, a reply comprising of relevant information to the specific question asked is provided by An Garda Síochána to the Department of Justice.

'The Garda response included details of various interactions which Commissioner Harris had with the Policing Authority and official reports on the fingerprints and DNA issues which dispute the whistleblower's claims.

But Deputy Kelly says that he will take the first available opportunity to raise the matter of the 17,000 "deleted" fingerprints with Minister for Justice Jim O'Callaghan in Dáil Éireann.

'I repeat my call for an inquiry, initiated by the Department of Justice, into all these matters this garda has disclosed about the force he has so long been a member of,' Deputy Kelly said.

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CHEMICAL, BIOLOGICAL, RADIOLOGICAL & NUCLEAR (CBRN) TRAINING



THREAT: Russian agents
Alexander Mishkin
and Anatoly Chepiga

A FURTHER revelation has highlighted a complete lack of preparedness and resilience by An Garda Síochána to deal with attacks or other mass casualty events involving CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological & Nuclear) agents.

The public need only look to our nearest neighbour, the UK to see how agents operating on behalf of foreign security services have previously deployed chemical and biological agents, such as the Novichok binary chemical nerve agent, for the purposes of conducting state-sponsored assassinations.

However, the risk of CBRN agents is not merely limited to deliberate attacks and such risk can arise as a result of an accident occurring in an industrial setting. Where such incidents arise (either by attack or accident), it falls to the forensic experts attaching to the Garda National Technical Bureau (GNTB) to deploy to those scenes and to provide the necessary forensic expertise.

However, not one member of the Garda National Technical Bureau has been trained or recertified in the area of CBRN for the entire seven-year duration of Drew Harris's tenure as Garda Commissioner. Not only have the members not been trained or recertified to permit them to operate in a CBRN environment, they have not been provided with the necessary equipment in the form of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to operate in a CBRN contaminated environment.

The necessary PPE in the form of CBRN suits and respirators must be of a particular standard and must be replaced at set intervals, as the suits have a defined expiry date, which must be adhered to.

It is understood that despite the inclusion of these issues as a significant risk on the Garda National Technical Bureau Divisional Risk Register, and despite numerous applications, from the Acting Head of the Garda National Technical Bureau (from 2019 to 2023) for the recertification of GNTB members and the urgent replacement of the CBRN suits and respirators on issue to those members, that no such recertification or replacement suits were provided. In fact, it is understood that these critical issues were never even responded to by Drew Harris and other members of the Garda Executive. Deputy Alan Kelly of Labour has confirmed that the Acting Head of the Garda National Technical Bureau provided the following information in support of the many applications he made in support of training, recertification and proper equipment:

This training is an urgent and essential requirement if the Garda organisation is to be capable of meeting its requirements in respect of such incidents. From a GNTB perspective, the Bureau has (or may have) a requirement to operate in hazardous environments in three key circumstances, namely:

■ The examination of a crime scene which has been contaminated, such as a terrorist attack using a Chemical, Biological, Radiological or Nuclear (CBRN) agent.

■ A Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) operation in a contaminated environment, such as in the aftermath of a CBRN terrorist attack, or a mass fatality incident arising from the escape of a hazardous material (HAZMAT) in an industrial setting.

■ The investigation and dismantling of Illicit Drugs Laboratories.

Historically, GNTB have maintained a core of personnel in each of the sections trained and equipped to operate in a CBRN environment. However, GNTB's capability has been completely eroded in recent years, firstly by the loss of trained operators to retirement, and secondly by the lapse in recertification for all CBRN trained Garda personnel and the expiry of the issued Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

The stark reality behind the application of the Acting Head of Bureau at GNTB was that not one member of GNTB has been recertified to allow them operate in a CBRN contaminated environment and not one of the CBRN suits available to GNTB members are within their expiry date. In simple terms this means that GNTB personnel could not operate in a CBRN contaminated environment without placing themselves and potentially those they would later come in contact with (including their families) at risk of chemical or biological contamination. While there is a natural hope that such an incident would never occur in this jurisdiction, there is a requirement for those leading the emergency response to such incidents to ensure that there is a level of resilience and preparedness to meet the possible threat. How can it be viewed as acceptable for any Garda Commissioner to merely cross his fingers and hope for the best, rather than him investing in the necessary training, certification and equipment to meet any such challenge? While Harris has listed the provision of equipment as one of his few legacy items, I think any ordinary-minded person reviewing Harris's performance in respect of CBRN would comment that Harris well underperformed and needs to do better.

PROTECTION:
PPE like this was
not available



READ WEEK 2 DISCLOSURES Pages 8 & 9

Gravely concerning

THE second Garda whistleblower has made fresh claims in more protected disclosures to the Irish Mail on Sunday – calling into question operational issues and revealing hidden depths to previously glimpsed issues with the force.

Here we publish extracts from his disclosures, edited for space and legal reasons only. We have taken the decision to print one of the extracts (immediately below) with significant redactions. This disclosure refers to a situation which is currently before

the courts. We do not publish the allegation lightly but only after significant editorial and ethical consideration. But the disclosure, if true, is of such importance that we felt we had no choice but to print that which we have not redacted.

CHIEF: Garda Commissioner Drew Harris talking to the media at Garda Headquarters this week

STING OPERATION WITH SEIZED GUNS

IT IS now understood that [REDACTED] men, aged in their [REDACTED], who were arrested in early [REDACTED] in regard to the alleged importation and possession of firearms, were actually supplied with the firearms and ammunition by Garda management.

... Firearms already in the possession of An Garda Síochána ... were delivered to [REDACTED] males from [REDACTED] in order for the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau (GNDOCB), with the likely assistance of other specialist units, to arrest the unsuspecting ...men with an interest in firearms. The [REDACTED] men in question had gone online to enquire about firearms. Their activity was picked up on by a foreign intelligence service who, via established intelligence channels, alerted An Garda Síochána as to the online presence of the [REDACTED] men and their inquisitiveness regarding firearms.

It is understood that the [REDACTED] men... were not previously known to gardai in a criminal context and nor were they associated with criminal or subversive groups. It is understood,

that having been alerted by the foreign security service, An Garda Síochána started to monitor the [REDACTED] men, during which time they were further engaged with in the online environment in regard to their firearms enquiry.

Rather than Commissioner Drew Harris and relevant senior Garda managers... considering an

arrest intervention strategy (a form of restorative justice) aimed at dissuading the [REDACTED] men from engaging in such behaviour, they rather chose to provide the... men with weapons so they could then arrest them.

While it was inferred by Garda management at the time that the men

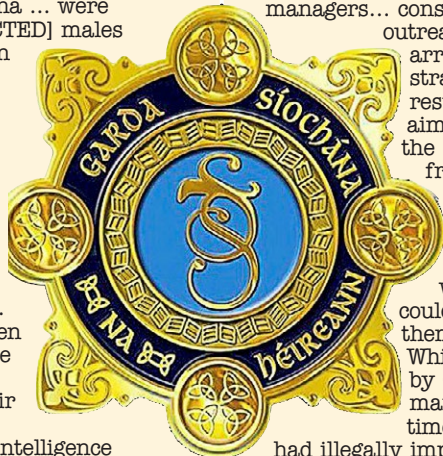
had illegally imported firearms into the Irish State, in reality, senior Garda management had instructed that firearms and ammunition already held by An Garda Síochána... be handed over to GNDOCB in order for that bureau to deliver these Garda-held firearms, thus allowing the [REDACTED] men to collect them. Included in the alleged cache were:

■ A [REDACTED] handgun

- A [REDACTED] military rifle, capable of semi-automatic and fully automatic fire
- [REDACTED] rounds of ammunition

The transfer of these weapons from Garda Headquarters to an established delivery location and the armed intervention that took place soon afterwards would have come at considerable cost to the State given the various specialist units involved and for what? Merely to retrieve the firearms and ammunition which were already in the possession of An Garda Síochána... and for such items to be returned to Garda Headquarters from where they had originated.

While they had originated. Where a controlled delivery by AGS in the event of illegal weapons actually being smuggled or imported into the State or where such firearms were being actively sought by criminal or terrorist organisations would of course be warranted, serious questions arise in respect of this particular issue and the arrest of [REDACTED] men without any criminal or subversive links. Not only was the public deceived... the courts and in particular Judge [REDACTED] were also deceived given that the court specifically asked if GNDOCB were aware of the origin of the weapons. Despite GNDOCB knowing the real provenance of the firearms and ammunition in question, it is understood the court was advised... that the provenance of the weapons was not yet known...



FINGERPRINT RETENTION

ANOTHER extremely serious scandal that has occurred under Drew Harris's leadership... not only impacts on the Garda organisation and its membership, but also impacts considerably on the human and legal rights of the citizens of the Irish State.

It is now apparent that for the entire duration of Harris's tenure as Garda Commissioner, and despite a senior Garda officer raising his significant concerns up until April 2023, at which point the officer decided to deal with his disclosures in a different manner, he continued to allow the mass retention of biometric (fingerprint) data and the associated personal data of the biometric donors, without the legal authority to do so. It is understood that the senior officer in question had been formally raising his concerns regarding the mass retention of fingerprint data from late 2016/early 2017, shortly after he assumed his role as head of a national bureau and that he continued to raise his significant concerns up until April 24, 2023. It is understood that such

concerns were even raised personally with Drew Harris in May 2019.

On taking over his role as Head of Bureau at the Garda National Technical Bureau the senior officer identified that biometric data in the form of livescan and wet-ink fingerprints were being held contrary to legislation. Following the enactment of the Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database System) Act, 2014 on November 20, 2015, the Garda organisation was legally obligated (under Part 11 of the Act) to apply strict retention and destruction requirements to fingerprint data in the same way that the organisation was obligated to apply strict retention and destruction requirements to DNA samples and profiles. In simple terms the Act of 2014 brought about a presumption of destruction rather than a presumption of retention and as such An Garda Síochána was obligated to remove fingerprints from the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) database, which it did not have legal authority to hold/retain.

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION

IN 2019 a Parliamentary Question was raised by then-TD Ms Lisa Chambers [pictured below] with the then-minister for justice Mr Charlie Flanagan. The question was as follows:
To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality the way in which he is ensuring that the collection and exchange of biometric data is carried out in compliance with domestic and international human rights law.

Identical Question(s): Defence
and Taoiseach
- Lisa Chambers.
* For Written answer on
13/02/2019
Ref No: 7338/19

The response provided by the Acting Head of the Garda National Technical Bureau (GNTB), which included concerns that the Garda organisation may have been operating outside of the legal parameters in regard to fingerprints and [donor] photographs, was as follows:

‘Domestic and international human rights

law is central to all Garda-related activities including those activities centred on the collection and exchange of biometric data. The key piece of domestic legislation in regard to the taking of biometric samples is the Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database system) Act of 2014, which lays down strict guidelines in regard to the collection, transfer and retention of biometric data. However, while it is the case that strict legislative retention and destruction guidelines are in place in respect of biometric data in the form of photographs, fingerprints and DNA, the Garda organisation may be operating outside such legislative parameters in regard to fingerprints and photographs and may therefore be in breach of

Article 8
ECHR

[European Convention on Human Rights]. This is currently the focus of discussions with the Office of the Attorney General and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and is something the organisation is endeavouring to put right in the shortest possible timeframe. A road map is also currently being considered by the Garda organisation regarding a centralised and unified approach to all three biometric strands.'

Interestingly, when then-minister for justice Charlie Flanagan responded to then-TD Lisa Chambers, the concerns raised by the Acting Head of GNTB in respect of the Garda organisation operating outside of the legislative parameters and potentially being in breach of Article 8 ECHR were not relayed to Ms Chambers. It is not known if this vital piece of information was withheld by Garda management or by officials within the Department of Justice. Either way, however, there was clearly a deliberate intent to obscure the head of GNTB's concerns from Ms Chambers and the opposition parties.



allegations mount



DNA SAMPLES

IN APRIL 2019, the Mail on Sunday and other media outlets reported on the significant Garda loss of biometric samples in the form of DNA samples and associated personal data. When reported on, it was understood by all reporting agencies that approximately 2,000 samples had been lost or mislaid by the Garda organisation. Once this scandal was exposed, Garda management, under the stewardship of Garda Commissioner Drew Harris, moved to express their shock at what was being disclosed, followed swiftly by the establishment of the 2019 DNA Inquiry, which was led by the late Assistant Commissioner John O'Driscoll. It is now evident that the media estimate of approximately 2,000 samples grossly underestimated the true number of DNA samples that were unaccounted for. The true number of samples that were unaccounted for came to almost 4,500 (4,446) samples. It must also be remembered that at the time the almost 4,500 samples were unaccounted for, the DNA Act which legislated for the taking of such DNA samples was only in force for just over three years, meaning that samples obtained since the enactment of the relevant legislation were only falling due for review for just over two years given that the retention of such samples arose approximately 10 to 12 months after the date the samples were originally obtained. Therefore, the 4,500 samples had not built up over years and years, but rather in a reasonably short and clearly defined period of time. In advance of the Criminal Justice (DNA Database System) Act, 2014 being enacted, a new office, titled the National Forensic Co-ordination Office, was established within the Garda National Technical Bureau (GNTB) to provide an oversight and governance role, on behalf of the Garda Commissioner, in respect of DNA samples and



profiles. Following the establishment of that office, it is understood that there was regular and positive engagement between the GNTB/NFCO and the DNA Directorate/Section within Forensic Science Ireland. It is understood that there was a strong and professional tripartite relationship between GNTB/NFCO, Forensic Science Ireland and the DNA Database System Oversight Committee established by Government, in accordance with legislation, to oversee the application of the legislation and the maintenance of the DNA Database. The close working relationship between GNTB/NFCO and Forensic Science Ireland ensured that GNTB/NFCO were regularly updated in regard to the number of DNA samples delivered/submitted and those that remained outstanding. It is now apparent that the senior Garda officer was consistently making disclosures and raising his concerns with the Garda Executive throughout 2017, 2018 and 2019 (up to the date of the media reporting in regard to the missing DNA samples). Of particular note was a disclosure from the senior officer to the Garda Executive dating to May 31, 2018 (almost a year prior to media reporting the significant data loss), which highlighted, in

stark terms, how concerning the situation was. The correspondence included significant disclosures concerning the non-compliance of An Garda Síochána in respect of Part 10 of the Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database System) Act, 2014. Such non-compliance referred to both DNA non-submissions and DNA retention and destruction requirements. The report highlighted that a significant number of DNA samples had not been submitted for inclusion on the DNA database operated by Forensic Science Ireland. It was stated that the non-submission rate of DNA samples had risen sharply from an average of 4% to 8% to over 20.27% and it was requested that the matter be raised with the Garda Executive to ensure a reversal of those figures. In addition to the troubling increase in DNA non-submissions, it was also further disclosed by the senior officer (only 2.5 years after the relevant legislation was enacted) that there were a 'significant number of DNA profiles being destroyed (i.e. 3,228 so far this year' [May 2018]) due to senior Garda managers failing to appropriately respond to retention notifications and due to the Garda Executive failing to instil an understanding as to the critical importance of compliance in respect of such matters. It must be understood that every DNA sample or DNA profile unnecessarily removed from the DNA Database gives rise to a potential negative impact on the investigation of crime. The potential arises for many criminal cases to go unsolved where the identity of the perpetrator was unknown and where the case was dependent upon the matching of a suspect's DNA with a DNA profile generated from a crime scene stain. No such match can arise where samples are not submitted for inclusion on the database or are submitted too late to allow for their inclusion on the database.

MISSING FINGERPRINTS

IN JULY 2021, the National Forensic Co-ordination Office (NFCO) within the Garda National Technical Bureau (GNTB) identified that electronic or live-scan fingerprints were falling into 'suspended' status on both the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) and Pulse systems. When this phenomenon was identified, due to improved governance streams introduced by the Acting Head of GNTB, further probing of Garda systems, by Garda ICT personnel, identified that in excess of 17,000 records had fallen into this 'suspended' status. When deeper probing of the system was undertaken it revealed that any fingerprint sets with a category or status of 'suspended' for a period of ninety (90) days were automatically deleted from the AFIS system. While the precise number of criminal cases

impacted by this catastrophic failure and data loss is not known, it is feasible that the overall number of cases directly impacted could run to nearly 17,000. Mr Alan Kelly, TD of Labour, who was the first member of the Dáil to raise this significant issue with the Department of Justice, stated that this issue is nothing short of a national scandal and that, despite the repeated claims from Garda Commissioner Drew Harris that he wants to do his best for the people of Ireland, he has possibly failed thousands of victims and in doing so has failed to meet the requirements placed on him by the Victims Charter and the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act, 2017. It is understood that despite the issue being raised by the GNTB in July 2021, Commissioner Harris took no specific actions to alert either the biometric donors or the

victims impacted. In fact... not only did Harris fail to advise donors and victims, he also neglected to advise the Minister for Justice, as was confirmed by the minister in a recent reply to a Parliamentary Question raised by Deputy Alan Kelly. In so doing, Harris again failed to comply with his statutory obligations under Section 41 of the Garda Síochána Act, 2005. Rather worryingly, the minister for justice has confirmed by way of a number of recent Parliamentary Question replies that Harris has failed to comply with his statutory obligations, either in a timely fashion or at all, in regard to some of the most serious and concerning issues. The question also arises as to how this system failure could occur in the first place. In that regard it is understood that the current AFIS system, which is still owned and maintained by the Garda

organisation and yet operated by Forensic Science Ireland (FSI) alone (with no Garda members having direct access to the front end or operational end of the system), is deemed to be obsolete with many of its component parts being deemed as end-of-life. It is also understood that the system was so dated that the vendor had indicated that it could no longer stand over the system and that it was at risk of complete failure. The starkness of the situation and the risk of system failure and the loss of data was raised with the Department of Justice as far back as Q4 2016, when then-minister Frances Fitzgerald held the role of minister for justice and was being threatened by the EU with infringement proceedings arising out of her failure to advance the issue of Prum [cross-border biometric data exchange] connectivity.



Garda scandals do a disservice to brave officers who risk their lives to keep us safe

WHEN a Garda dies in the line of duty, every right-minded citizen feels the loss. That loss can never be as acute as the pain of the officer's family, friends and colleagues in blue, but it still comes as a visceral violation.

Readers of the Irish Mail on Sunday will join us in extending sincere sympathies to the wife, children, family, friends and colleagues of Garda Kevin Flatley who died in the line of duty this week.

This newspaper has in recent weeks and months, and over the years, been a harsh critic of Garda management, both current and past. But our revelations of unusual decisions taken at the top echelons, coupled with requests for more accountability, derive from nothing more than a desire to see the proper resourcing and governance of An Garda Síochána.

For Irish citizens, the men and women of An Garda Síochána represent a force for good, and the specific issues we

have raised do not take away from the central position the gardaí hold as guardians of the peace in our society.

The revelations in today's newspaper join last week's disclosures about how the defective holster worn by Detective Garda Colm Horkan on the night of his murder was subsequently handled in requiring due scrutiny.

Last Sunday, Garda Flatley was struck down while he was standing on a road on traffic duty. He was enforcing the laws he had sworn to uphold. The whistleblowers believe by raising allegations featured in recent weeks they are attempting to do the same. Both whistleblowers we have featured believe their actions are underpinned by a firm sense of duty

and solidarity with the rank and file, middle management and some senior managers who are convinced that, in recent years, An Garda Síochána has been on the wrong path.

Yesterday Garda Commissioner Drew Harris attended the Garda Memorial Day at Dublin Castle. It will be his last memorial, as he leaves in September. History will decide his

legacy and, whatever the verdict, it will be inextricably linked with the allegations from two whistleblowers, unless he addresses them in an appropriate forum.

But it is not just the Commissioner's legacy that is at stake; gardaí of all ranks deserve to know the truth. And in the case of the defective gun holsters, deserve to know their personal safety is valued by their bosses. In the week that saw Garda Flatley make the ultimate sacrifice, it behoves Garda management to come out and properly address the claims of both whistleblowers.

The Irish people are generally law-abiding, with the vast majority wanting a society in which they can live and work, in the knowledge that the rule of law applies equally. Scandals in An Garda Síochána compromise the force's ability to retain the trust of the citizens.

And they do a disservice to the many Garda members prepared to go above and beyond in service of an ideal.

In excruciating pain, I was given anti-anxiety medication for appendicitis

IMAGINE going to a GP's surgery suffering from excruciating pain, with cramps so bad that you keep throwing up. After listening to you describe your symptoms, the doctor prescribes you anti-anxiety medication for stress. Later, you find out from another doctor that, in fact, you have appendicitis.

This may like a ridiculous scenario, but it happened to me – and it's the reality for countless women who experience inequality in Irish healthcare, where they are dismissed, ignored or misdiagnosed by medical professionals.

Since first speaking about this issue in the Seanad – during a debate to mark Women's Health Week – I have heard from a significant number of women about their own personal experiences of having their pain and symptoms dismissed or ignored.

It should not take generation after generation of women to speak up and share their deeply personal stories with the world for our healthcare system to wake up, take note, and make changes.

What I have described is colloquially known as 'medical gaslighting' – a term that captures the systematic failure to believe women about their symptoms. Women in Ireland frequently report being told their pain is 'normal', 'in their heads' or 'anxiety-related'.

These brush-offs are not just anecdotal. They are supported by international and national studies showing that women wait longer for diagnosis, particularly for conditions like endometriosis, autoimmune disorders, cardiovascular disease and even cancer.

Shockingly, women experiencing a heart attack are 50% more likely to be misdiagnosed than men. For more vulnerable women, such as women with disabilities, those from disadvantaged communities, older women, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ women, their experience can be even more extreme.

Women experiencing severe endometriosis have been told it is 'just bad period pain', while those with debilitating menopausal symptoms are dismissed with 'it's just a natural part of aging'. Older women with chronic back pain



By **PATRICIA STEPHENSON**

SOCIAL DEMOCRATS SENATOR AND SPOKESWOMAN ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

have been flippantly asked: 'Sure, what do you expect at your age?'

Young women with autoimmune symptoms are being given antidepressants in place of a proper diagnosis.

One woman I spoke to revealed that she takes her husband to her appointments to make sure the doctor takes her seriously.

Medical gaslighting is not just about misdiagnosis. It is a fundamental breach of trust that leads to an erosion of women's faith in the healthcare system.

And if you do not trust the system, you are less likely to go to the GP or hospital with your health concerns, and that, in turn, increases the chance of longer-term complications.

When women gather up the courage to seek help, they are not looking for sympathy – they are looking for solutions. They want, and deserve, doctors who will listen, investigate, and treat them with respect. So why are women so often the victims of medical gaslighting? The answer is

complex but rooted in both cultural and systemic factors.

Firstly, there is a long history of gender bias in medicine. Women's bodies have been misunderstood and their symptoms written off as 'hysteria' for centuries. Medical research has been predominantly carried out on men, leading to diagnostic criteria that do not account for women's differential symptoms. However, given that women account for 50% of the population, this explanation alone falls a little flat in the modern age.

Secondly, there is often a communication gap. Women are more likely to describe their symptoms in nuanced terms such as 'I feel anxious', 'I am always tired' or 'something just feels wrong'. But instead of hearing these as valid

descriptions of how they are feeling, some doctors view them as signs of psychological issues.

Finally, there is the power dynamic. Doctors are experts, and patients are often expected to trust them without question. But when that trust is broken, patients feel powerless. Women who challenge a doctor's opinion are sometimes labelled 'difficult'.

The current and previous government made commitments to improve women's healthcare. In 2021, the Department of Health published a report highlighting the gaps in care and communication that women face.

We are in the second phase of a Women's Health Action Plan, and we're seeing new regional fertility hubs and endometriosis clinics opening around the country. It would be disingenuous to say things haven't improved at all. But nevertheless, women's daily experiences in our healthcare system continue to be incredibly challenging, alienating and disempowering. We need to find a solution. As a starting point, I'd like to see gender sensitivity training offered to all healthcare providers, with a focus on symptom and diagnostic differences between men and women.

There are other practical steps the Government could take. These should include additional funding for menopause clinics, as well as making the full cost of HRT truly free – including the GP consultation, as is the case with the State's contraception scheme.

A dedicated endometriosis centre, staffed with multidisciplinary teams, must also be established as a matter of urgency. This would be a game-changer for women suffering from this painful condition – many of whom are currently forced to go abroad for treatment.

This is a human rights issue. Women have a right to healthcare. We have a right to be treated with dignity and respect and, crucially, to be believed within the healthcare system.

FREE INSIDE

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GARDA COLM HORKAN MURDER

STATE WAS WARNED OF DANGERS OF GARDA HOLSTERS

Whistleblower raised alarm nine months before tragedy

A GARDA whistleblower warned management and the Garda watchdog that gun holsters used by officers were 'not fit for purpose' before tragedies that led to the death of Detective Colm Horkan and left another with life-changing injuries,

EXCLUSIVE

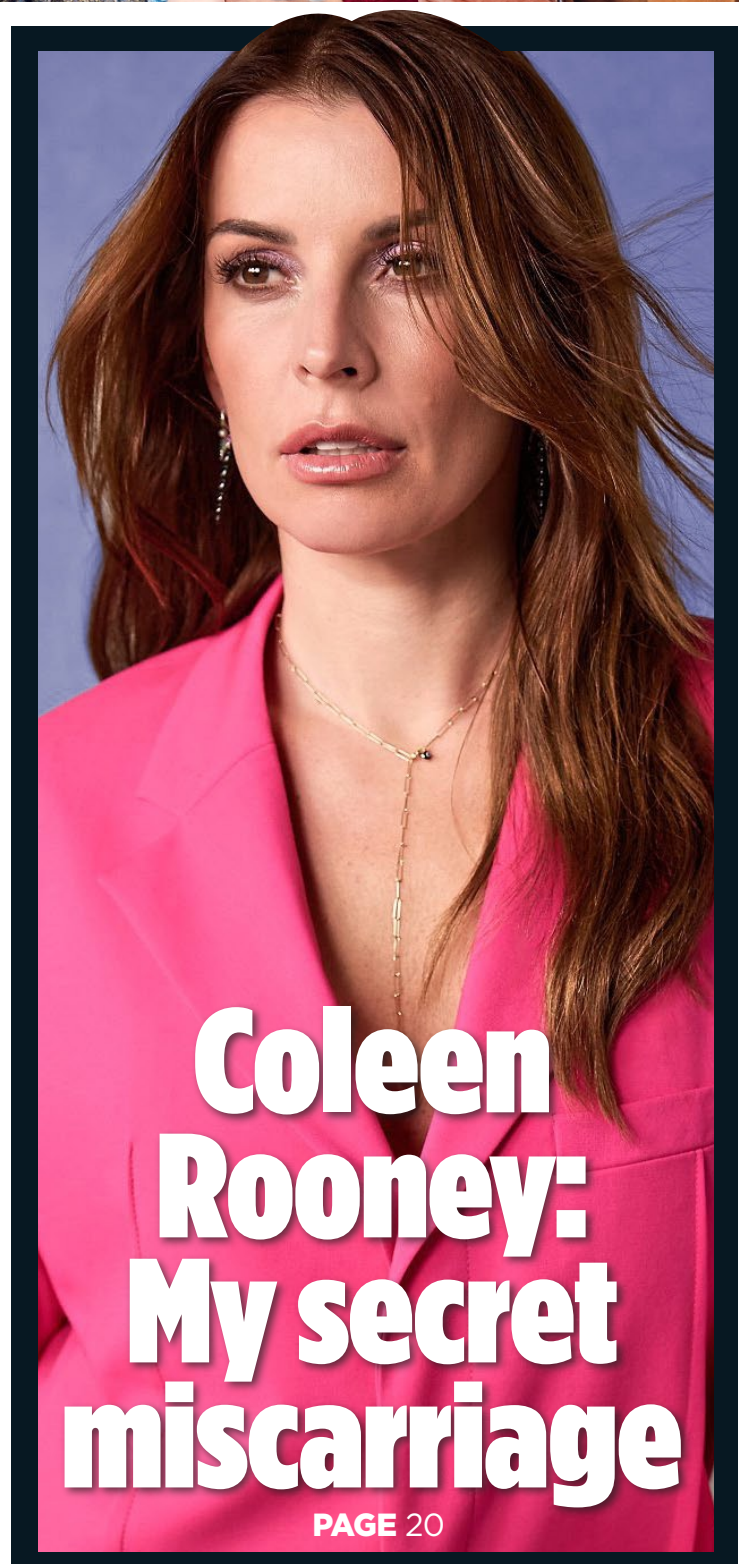
By **John Lee** GROUP POLITICAL EDITOR

the Irish Mail on Sunday can reveal.

In separate protected disclosures to Garda management and the Garda

Síochána Ombudsman Office (GSOC) in 2019, nine months before Detective Horkan's murder, the whistleblower raised safety concerns about Garda HQ-issued holsters with automatic

Turn to Page 6 >>



**Coleen
Rooney:
My secret
miscarriage**

PAGE 20

► From Page One

pistols used by armed detectives. Holsters specifically designed for the 9mm Sig Sauer P226 and Walther guns make it impossible for an assailant to take the weapons or for them to fire accidentally.

The year after the whistleblower made his initial two protected disclosures, on June 17, 2020, Detective Colm Horkan was murdered in the line of duty when his killer took his Sig Sauer from his holster and fired 15 rounds, hitting him up to 11 times. Detective Horkan's killer was convicted of capital murder this year.

Just six days before the murder, on June 11, another detective garda on protective duty outside the Israeli Embassy in Ballsbridge, Dublin, sustained 'life-changing' injuries to his groin when his Walther pistol discharged accidentally.

Both officers were carrying their pistols in leather holsters made by a another supplier that the whistleblower – a firearms expert – claimed in his protected disclosures was not approved by the gun manufacturers.

GWSOC this weekend confirmed it launched an investigation into the holsters in June/July 2020 in the wake of the tragic events, but nine months after the whistleblower first raised his concerns with the watchdog.

An Garda Síochána also confirmed the holsters were replaced in September 2020. Many of the whistleblower's claims are repeated in a letter his legal representatives sent to Justice Minister Helen McEntee last Monday. The letter states how, on September 9, 2019, the whistle-

'Retaliatory steps were then taken by people'

blower met members of the Garda Ombudsman at the Stillorgan Park Hotel in Dublin, where he outlined his concerns about the safety of the HQ-issued holsters alongside other issues. After the two tragedies – shortly after Ms McEntee was appointed justice minister – the whistleblower made a further disclosure in August 2020 to the Fine Gael politician, after which an investigation was launched into his allegations separate to the GSOC safety investigation launched the previous month. Separately, the whistleblower also made a protected disclosure to the State's spending watchdog, the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The whistleblower, who worked at the Garda Firearms Stores at Garda Headquarters in Dublin's Phoenix Park, made his initial protected disclosure to Garda liaison staff on June 7, 2019.

In the letter sent to Ms McEntee this week, the whistleblower's legal representative claims 'a series of retaliatory steps were then taken' by people in the force.

This led the officer to go to GSOC. During his September 2019 meeting with GSOC officers, the whistleblower made a protected disclosure, according to documents seen by the Irish Mail on Sunday.

In claims repeated in the letter to Ms McEntee, the whistleblower said: 'Explicit reference to his very substantial concerns that... holsters being purchased by An Garda Síochána [were] not fit for purpose.'

According to the documents, the whistleblower told GSOC officers: 'The holsters were officially issued to gardaí carrying Sig Sauer P226R DAO, S/A D/A and Walther P99c DAO pistols. These holsters were unapproved by the gun manufacturer, Sig Sauer, and did not have

Gardaí turned on firearms expert over alert

SPECIAL REPORT



By
JOHN LEE

GROUP POLITICAL EDITOR

essential safety features common to such specialist accessories which ensure that they have rigid protection to avoid unintended discharge and that a pistol worn in that holster can only be drawn from the holster by the holster wearer.'

Similar concerns were raised in the whistleblower's first protected disclosure to Garda management.

Referring to the two tragic incidents involving firearms, the whistleblower said the June 11 incident at the Israeli Embassy occurred when the detective's pistol 'discharged accidentally while con-

tained in its Garda-issued holster'.

The document states: 'The Garda Síochána-issued holster was made of pliable leather... it lacked the necessary rigidity to prevent inappropriate or unintended pressure being applied to firearm carried within. D/Garda [name deleted] sustained life-changing injuries when his Garda-issued firearm, a Walther P99c DAO pistol, which was contained in a holster in his pocket, discharged accidentally.'

The whistleblower said of the fatal shooting of Detective Horkan: 'Six days later again, on June 17, 2020,

the gun of D/Garda Colm Horkan was removed from his Garda-issued holster by an assailant.

'The event took place on the street in Castlerea, Co. Roscommon. The Garda Síochána-issued holster was made by the same [supplier]. Garda Horkan died of 11 bullet wounds from rounds discharged from his Garda-issued weapon, a Sig Sauer P226R DAO, which was removed from the... holster.'

It has now emerged that questions were raised about the holsters within the force immediately after the two incidents in June 2020.

In response to detailed queries from the MoS, GSOC confirmed that it launched an investigation into the holsters' safety and issued correspondence formally notifying Garda management about concerns relating to the holsters in July 2020, the month after Detective Horkan's murder.

However, in the letter sent to Ms McEntee this week, dated October 30, the whistleblower's legal advisers are critical of GSOC, claiming that they refused to investigate the safety concerns he expressed in his protected disclosure in 2019.

Whistleblower raised concerns over

JUNE 7, 2019: A Garda firearms expert meets with the force's employee liaison and raises issues about safety, procedure and procurement at Garda HQ. They specifically refer to safety concerns about Garda-issued holsters for Sig Sauer and Walther weapons.

SEPTEMBER 9, 2019: Garda whistleblower meets two GSOC officers at Stillorgan Park Hotel,

Dublin, to make a protected disclosure. The disclosure includes claims Garda-issued holsters are 'unfit for purpose'. The whistleblower says holsters officially issued to gardaí carrying Sig Sauer P226R and Walther P99c DAO pistols were unapproved by weapons' manufacturers. Walther did not have essential safety features common to such specialist accessories which ensure they have

rigid protection to avoid unintended discharge. Sig Sauer pistols were not carried in a manufacturer holster that can only be drawn by the wearer.

JUNE 11, 2020: A detective garda suffers serious injury on protective duty at the Israeli Embassy.

JUNE 17, 2020: Detective Garda Colm Horkan is murdered after an assailant took his Sig Sauer from his

holster during an incident in Castlerea, Co. Roscommon.

JUNE 27, 2020: Leo Varadkar appoints Fine Gael TD Helen McEntee as Minister for Justice.

JUNE/JULY 2020: GSOC opens an investigation into the accidental shooting of a detective garda at the Israeli Embassy and the holsters. The investigation remains open.



PROBLEMS:
Justice Minister
Helen McEntee
and Garda
Commissioner
Drew Harris



**'WHY I QUIT
FORCE I
LOVE AFTER
INJURY'**
Comment, page 36

Separately Ms McEntee was also informed in last Monday's letter that GSOC investigators told the whistleblower on June 24, 2022 that after failing to gain access to Garda files on the whistleblower, they were forced to close their investigation. Despite this, five months later a Justice official told the whistleblower the GSOC investigation was 'well progressed' – raising significant questions about departmental oversight and co-operation between An Garda Síochána and GSOC.

In a statement issued this weekend, GSOC said: 'GSOC is precluded

from either confirming or denying the existence of protected disclosures made to it. GSOC is equally precluded from disclosing or discussing any operational or other matters that may arise from disclosures it may receive.

'GSOC will therefore not be providing any comment with respect to your queries.'

However, the Ombudsman, in acknowledgement of a query relating 'to the injury sustained by a named D/Garda while on duty', added: 'This incident [the accidental shooting of the garda] was the

subject of a referral to GSOC by An Garda Síochána under s102 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005.'

A spokesman confirmed: '[During] the course of this investigation, GSOC issued formal correspondence to An Garda Síochána to alert them to safety concerns in respect of firearm holsters. This correspondence issued in July 2020. I can also advise that this investigation is nearing conclusion. I am given to understand that this matter is also before the civil courts, so GSOC cannot comment any further.'

Garda headquarters this week-

Garda pistol same as one used to take down Osama

By John Lee

THE Sig Sauer P226 is a semi-automatic pistol issued to many police forces around the world.

It is the official service pistol of the famed US Navy SEALs, the elite army unit who killed Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden.

The weapon was first issued to gardaí ten years ago. The manufacturer recommends use of approved holsters, mostly rigid hard plastic, but there are some recommended rigid leather ones.

Because there is no manual safety catch on a Sig Sauer, the manufacturer recommends a holster that gives protection against accidental firing.

Manufacturer-recommended holsters also offer additional safety in that they make it difficult for an assailant to withdraw the gun from an officer.

Recommended holsters include the Rounded Gear IWB Kydex Holster, the IMI Level-2 Tactical

Holster, the Comp-Tac International Holster and the 1791 Gunleather holster.

The Walther P99c, a German made weapon, is also issued by

An Garda Síochána to officers, but is less commonly used than the

Sig Sauer.

Again, there are manufacturer approved holsters which greatly reduce the chances of accidental discharge.

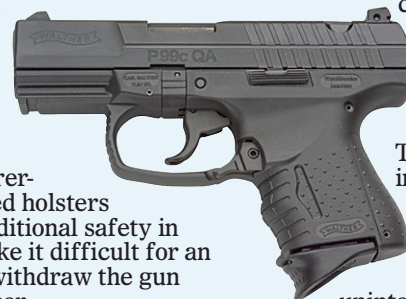
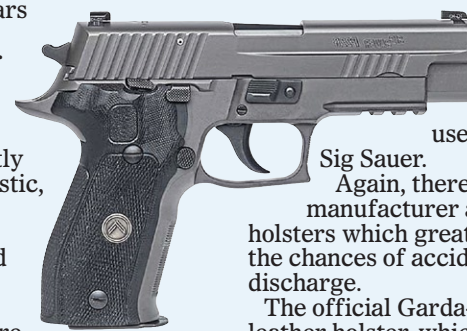
The official Garda-issued leather holster, which is not one of those recommended by the manufacturer, is designed to

carry the self-loading 9mm Sig Sauer P226, and a similar one is used to carry the Walther.

The pistol is placed in the sheath and secured by a single snap button. But in some instances firearms have

unintentionally fallen to the ground during on-foot pursuits or physical altercations.

Some serving detectives and members of the Garda Armed Support Unit have purchased their own modern plastic holsters from the United States.



GARDA ISSUE: Sig Sauer P226 and, below it, the German-made Walther P99c weapon

end said it could not comment on any matters subject to protected disclosures. Asked if the holsters remain in use, a spokesperson confirmed: '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.' Correspondence sent to Garda stations across the country by the Garda Technical Bureau in September 2020 warned about the holsters. Headlined 'Examination, Assessment and Replacement of Official Issue Leather Hip Hol-

sters', the circular said: 'The Garda National Technical Bureau has become aware of a potential softening of some leather hip holsters, for both the Walther P99c and Sig Sauer P226 pistols.'

It warned this softening 'may impact on the holstering and carriage of the firearm'.

The communique said that all official leather hip-holsters for the Walther P99c and Sig Sauer P226 should undergo safety checks by Garda armourers.

In June this year, Stephen Silver was found guilty of the capital murder of Detective Horkan.

The jury of seven men and five women deliberated for eight hours and 39 minutes before returning its unanimous verdict to Judge Tara Burns at the Central Criminal Court. Silver now faces a minimum sentence of 40 years in prison.

Regarding the claims made by the whistleblower, a spokesperson for Ms McEntee said the Department of Justice 'cannot confirm or deny the existence of any protected disclosure,' adding: 'This policy is in place to preserve the statutory guarantee of anonymity under the Protected Disclosures Act.'

The supplier who made the holsters did not respond to phone calls or emails.

holster safety on several occasions

AUGUST 14, 2020: Whistleblower makes a protected disclosure to Minister McEntee in the aftermath of the killing of Detective Horkan. The minister refers the protected disclosure to GSOC, which opens another investigation into the whistleblower's claims, 11 months after the initial disclosure.

SEPTEMBER 2020: A 'tender process for firearms accessories'

concludes. A Garda spokesperson confirmed that 'this process resulted in a new supplier of holsters being retained by An Garda Síochána'.

SEPTEMBER 9, 2020: The Garda Technical Bureau issues a circular to garda stations across the country warning that it 'has become aware of a potential softening of some leather hip

holsters, for both the Walther P99c and Sig Sauer P226 pistols'.

NOVEMBER 1, 2022: Whistleblower makes further protected disclosures to the justice minister, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste relating to his concerns about the holsters' safety.

MARCH 15, 2023: Stephen Silver is convicted of the murder of Detective Horkan at the Central

Criminal Court in Dublin. He is eventually sentenced to 40 years in prison.

OCTOBER 30, 2023: Solicitor Kevin Winters of Belfast firm Human Rights Solicitors corresponds with Ms McEntee on behalf of the whistleblower, requesting an official independent inquiry and for action to be taken on claims made in his protected disclosures.

The risks of ignoring childhood trauma

Weight loss jabs for children as young as six



SOURFAUX: How to spot health food fakes

GARDA 'OBTAINED ARMS AT PHOENIX PARK HQ TO SELL'

Whistleblower claims in explosive disclosure that court-appointed receiver signed over firearms that were earmarked for destruction

EXCLUSIVE

By John Lee
Group Political Editor

A GARDA took possession of valuable firearms – earmarked for destruction at the force's HQ – to sell for profit, according to confidential documents seen by the Irish Daily Mail.

The documents are part of a number of protected disclosures that also allege automatic firearms, ammunition and explosives were kept in a shipping container at HQ without any proper documentation, tracing or security.

The revelations come in the wake of claims by a Garda whistleblower – published by our sister paper The Irish Mail on Sunday – that the 'arms dump', as he termed it, was secured only by a combination padlock.

The lock's combination was known to
Turn to Page 4



Stocks plunge for third day as Trump escalates fight with China

SEE PAGES 6-7

FREE INSIDE Dr Mosley's new Fast 800 Ozempic diet

The perfect eating plan for those using fat jabs
– and it'll help keep weight off long term, too!

PAGES 34-36



By Michael
Mosley's
doctor
son, Jack

€100 EASTER DEALS

CRACK OPEN
EGG-STRA SPECIAL
SAVINGS ON FAMILY
DAYS OUT

VOUCHERS – PAGE 20
IN ASSOCIATION WITH



GARDAÍ FEAR FOUR LOST FIREARMS 'IN CRIMINAL HANDS'

Whistleblower claims 'cover up' over seized guns

By John Lee

GROUP POLITICAL EDITOR

GARDAÍ fear that four missing guns, originally seized in 2009 alongside a twice-seized Winchester pump action shotgun, are now in criminal hands.

It is the latest revelation to come from a series of protected disclosures from two Garda whistleblowers who have ratcheted up pressure on Garda Commissioner Drew Harris.

One whistleblower – a serving member of An Garda Síochána – has pointed to the

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Letter to O'Dwyer sons asked them 'not to carry his coffin'

SEE PAGES 12 & 13

CHI scandal: Whistleblower claims doctors start surgeries without X-rays

EXCLUSIVE

READ FULL STORY AND
EXTRACTS FROM THE
PROTECTED DISCLOSURE

SEE PAGES 8 & 9 >>

Taoiseach asked about Carlow shooter in Dáil

TAOISEACH Micheál Martin was asked in the Dáil yesterday why the Gardaí did not tell a judge about the provenance of guns that were involved in the arrest last year of Carlow shooter Evan Fitzgerald.

Yesterday, Labour TD Alan Kelly quizzed the Taoiseach under Dáil privilege about the role of the Gardaí and the Department of Justice in the firearms case.

Mr Martin committed to speaking to Justice Minister Jim O'Callaghan about the questions raised by Mr Kelly.

Evan Fitzgerald was brought before Naas District Court last year on charges of possession of firearms. Mr Fitzgerald,

By **John Lee**
Group Political Editor

22, fired shots into the air at Fairgreen Shopping Centre, in Carlow, on June 1, before dying from a self-inflicted wound.

Mr Kelly told the Dáil yesterday 'when [Naas District Court judge] Judge Zaidan asked what the provenance of the guns was, the garda said, "investigations are ongoing" into who sold the guns'.

Micheál Martin, during Questions on Policy or Legislation, said: 'The events in Carlow were very traumatic for everyone involved, for the wider community

and the family of Evan Fitzgerald, a young man whose life is now no more. It is a very sad and traumatic event.'

He added: 'I will check with the Minister For Justice for clarity.' Mr Kelly also

'Very sad and traumatic event'

asked about a timeline of events.

Mr Kelly asked: 'How could the Department of Justice confirm in writing to a member of the media that the issue

in relation to Evan Fitzgerald's tragic case was referred to Fiosrú on May 10 and the Minister could not comment because of that, yet at the Justice Committee

yesterday, the Commissioner said he referred it on 18 to 19 May?'

Mr Martin responded that he would also 'seek clarity' from Minister O'Callaghan 'around dates'.

'The Minister or the Department of Justice may have been told this was going to Fiosrú,' said Mr Martin. 'If that is the case, one does not comment on it. That is normal.'

Excavation works at Tuam to FINALLY start next week

By **Helen Bruce**
and **Jonathan McCambridge**

EXCAVATION works on the site of a mass grave at the Tuam Mother and Baby Home – believed to hold almost 800 children – are to begin next week.

Preliminary work is set to start on Monday, and is expected to take around four weeks, before the full-scale excavation gets under way.

The work will continue over the next two years in an effort to reunite the infant remains buried there with the families of their descendants.

DNA samples gathered from relatives will be cross-referenced with bone fragments recovered from the site, in the hope of identifying the remains of infants who died at the home between 1925 and 1961.

However, concerns have been

'It is better late than never'

raised that an appeal for prospective family members to come forward to provide DNA samples has yielded little results.

Historian Catherine Corless, whose painstaking research brought news of the children's mass grave in Tuam to the world's attention, said applications were still open for potential family members to send in samples of their DNA and urged people to do so.

She told the Irish Daily Mail: 'It is wonderful that this work is happening now. It's a pity it took so long for things to be done right by the government at the time and the authorities, who stalled and stalled, but it is better late than never.'

'It is open for the next two years or so for people to send in DNA samples. They started with taking samples from the most elderly relatives, or those who were not very well, but the process is well open. It has been advertised widely across the US as well, as many people went to America, so I hope they come forward.'

Families asked for DNA samples and urged to visit site now before it's shut for two-year dig



Illegitimate children who died in institution for unmarried mothers run by nuns were buried in an unmarked plot

A MASS GRAVE OF 800 BABIES

EXCLUSIVE

Mr MacSweeney said: 'From the start of works on June 16, the entire site, including the memorial garden, will be accessible only to staff carrying out the works and 24-hour security monitoring will be in place.'

'The initial four weeks will involve setting up the site, including the installation of 2.4-metre hoarding around the perimeter.'

'These measures are necessary to ensure the site's forensic integrity and to enable us to carry out the works to the highest international standards that govern the excavation and recovery programme.'

Mr MacSweeney said: 'From the start of works on June 16, the entire site, including the memorial garden, will be accessible only to staff carrying out the works and 24-hour security monitoring will be in place.'

'The initial four weeks will involve setting up the site, including the installation of 2.4-metre hoarding around the perimeter.'

'These measures are necessary to ensure the site's forensic integrity and to enable us to carry out the works to the highest international standards that govern the excavation and recovery programme.'

He added: 'This is a unique and incredibly complex excavation.' It is expected the work will take approximately two years to complete.

The presence of human remains has already been confirmed in chambers under a part of the site, which has been maintained as a memorial garden for several decades. But a broader area, totalling around 5,000sq.m, which takes in a playground and adjoining land, will also be carefully

'Unique, incredibly complex'

excavated over the next two years. Mr MacSweeney told RTE that the work will be carried out in a meticulous fashion, to the highest international standards.

In the first instance, those involved will be examining if ground that is exposed has been disturbed over the last century.

In turn, that will lead to more detailed searches in specific



Years of painstaking research: Historian Catherine Corless

places. Mr MacSweeney said the size of infant bones, deterioration over time and the possibility that remains were 'co-mingled', may complicate further the already challenging task that is being undertaken.

The discovery of human remains linked to the Famine in recent years will also have to be factored in to the analysis of any bone fragments recovered.

On May 25, 2014, the Irish Daily Mail's sister paper, the Irish Mail on Sunday, first reported the existence of a mass grave in Tuam, Co. Galway. The shock discovery made headlines all over the world. It was revealed by the Mail that the unmarked plot could contain as many as 796 babies born at a mother and-baby home over three decades.

The report detailed how the babies had been buried in a concrete tank at an unmarked site next to the former Bon Secours home in Tuam, which housed residents from 1925 to 1961.

It told how the existence of the grave was uncovered by Ms Corless, who had researched all children in Galway whose place of death was marked 'Children's Home, Tuam'.

Files of the local health board showed that the home housed hundreds of children, many of whom suffered deformities, malnutrition and neglect.

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