
For Oral Answer on : 12/03/2019
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Department: Justice and Equality
Asked by: Brendan Smith T.D.

QUESTION

To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality his views on the need to provide additional staffing resources to the Border region in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

REPLY

In common with all Government Departments and State Agencies, An Garda Síochána has been preparing for Brexit and there is ongoing engagement between senior Garda management and my Department in this regard. Preparation has had a wide-ranging focus on operational requirements, including personnel, infrastructure and technology. I know the Commissioner is committed to ensuring the organisation can deal with any policing challenges arising from Brexit though clearly the circumstances which may arise are dependant on the political settlement.

As the Deputy is well aware, the Government's policy is that there will be no hard border on the island and there are no plans for such. However, as he is also aware, policing in the border region has always presented particular challenges and this can be expected to increase in the context of Brexit. It is also the case that violent dissident republican groups continue to seek to frustrate counter-terrorism efforts and organised criminals seek to exploit the two jurisdictions in order to try to evade detection.

The 2018 Cross-Border Threat Assessment prepared jointly by An Garda Síochána and the PSNI estimated that some 43 per cent of organised crime gangs in Northern Ireland have a cross-border dimension. Likewise, mobile organised crime groups, responsible for multiple instances of domestic burglary, operate on an all-island basis. There are increasing instances of borderless crimes such as cyber fraud and international terrorism.

The success of cross border policing actions is grounded in the recognition that the best means of combatting the threat to our communities is to maintain and enhance the excellent levels of cooperation between law enforcement agencies north and south of the border. The Gardaí and PSNI, along with other agencies, have worked together closely for many years and enjoy an excellent working relationship and co-operation at all levels.

The Fresh Start Agreement recognised this and led to the establishment of Joint Agency Investigation Teams which have had considerable success in combatting this type of crime. I understand this is also the context for the Commissioner's operational decision to establish an additional Armed Support Unit in Cavan.

Garda ASUs provide a rapid armed response capacity and capability on a Regional basis.

Members of the ASUs are highly trained and equipped with a variety of non-lethal and lethal weapons and perform high visibility armed checkpoints and patrols throughout their respective Regions. In the Northern Region ASUs are currently based in Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal and Dundalk, Co. Louth.

Garda deployments in all areas of the country including those along the Border have benefitted from increased recruitment in recent years. I am advised by the Commissioner that the strength of the Northern Region as on 31 January, the latest date for which figures are currently available, was 1,406 Gardaí. There are 59 Garda Reserves and 144 Garda civilian staff attached to the Northern Region. An additional 49 Gardaí were assigned to the region with effect from last Friday.

The increased resources coming on stream have also provided the capacity to expand the specialist bureaus including the National Bureau of Criminal Investigation, the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau and the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau, all of which are particularly active in the Northern Region in addition to the Armed Support Units.

The ongoing recruitment will provide the Commissioner with the resources needed to deploy increasing numbers of Gardaí to deliver a visible, effective and responsive policing service. These requirements will be kept under ongoing review by Garda management with a view to addressing any policing requirements for the Border region which may arise depending upon the outcome of the Brexit negotiations. In the event that a “no deal” Brexit gives rise to additional requirements in border areas, further resources can and will be provided through redeployment.

I want to assure the Deputy that An Garda Síochána has the full support of the Government in dealing with the implications of Brexit and will provide the necessary resources to keep our people and our communities safe.