

Press release

An Garda Síochána to immediately begin process of purchasing bodycams

From [Department of Justice \(/en/organisation/departments-of-justice/\)](/en/organisation/departments-of-justice/)

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Minister for Justice Helen McEntee has announced that An Garda Síochána is to immediately begin the process of procuring bodyworn cameras for frontline Gardaí.

Following a Cabinet meeting at which Government discussed how to equip An Garda Síochána with the necessary tools and technologies to build stronger, safer communities, Minister McEntee said Garda Commissioner Drew Harris will now begin tendering for the purchase of bodyworn cameras.

The Minister said these are crucial to improving safety of members of frontline Gardaí, as well as assisting in the investigation of crime.

Following consultation with government colleagues, the Minister also today said the use of Facial Recognition Technology will be provided for separately in the new Garda Síochána (Digital Management and Facial Recognition Technology) Bill 2023.

The Minister said this Bill will be drafted on a priority basis to provide for the safe and ethical use of Facial Recognition Technology to assist Gardaí to investigate the most serious crimes which are subject to a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

These include:

- threats to national security and critical infrastructure
- homicide
- rape and aggravated sexual assault
- child sexual abuse

Minister McEntee said child abduction

- the most serious violent offences, often committed against vulnerable victims - these are robbery, aggravated burglary, and assault causing serious harm

"Today's government decision allows An Garda Síochána to immediately begin the process of procuring bodyworn cameras, vital and modern policing equipment, which will better protect frontline Gardaí and strengthen their ability to deliver on their duty to deter, detect and investigate crime. This modern technology is a key tool for frontline Gardaí and represents a practical expression of our commitment to build stronger, safer communities. I believe it is essential to delivering on Government's aim to ensure An Garda Síochána is a leading edge, modern police service fit for the digital age.

"As Minister for Justice, I know from my regular engagements with individual frontline Gardaí and the Garda Commissioner how valuable bodyworn cameras will be for Garda members.

"We see now how Gardai are often selectively filmed themselves without access to their own technology to record accurate footage.

"Bodyworn cameras will also be vital to tackling crimes such as domestic violence. The first moments when a Garda arrives on the scene are so often crucial in protecting victims and ensuring that in the event of a prosecution, they can access justice.

"Of course, we must also have the most up to date technology to allow Gardai process what the Garda Commissioner has described as an explosion in the use of digital data in criminal investigations. We cannot continue to have an analogue police service in a digital age.

"Without adequate data analysis tools, the length of criminal investigations will increase, potentially threatening public safety and delaying victims' access to justice. It is imperative that An Garda Síochána can utilise modern technology with appropriate safeguards to increase efficiencies within the organisation and ensure that policing expertise is utilised in the most effective and strategic manner. That is why I firmly believe Facial Recognition Technology is also vital to ensuring that Gardai can do their jobs most effectively."

Minister McEntee also today secured Cabinet approval to progress the current Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Bill 2022 in the Oireachtas as a priority in the coming weeks. This will allow for the legislative underpinning for the use of bodyworn cameras.

The bodycams to be procured by An Garda Síochána will include Facial Recognition Technology (FRT) software to ensure they can also be fully used in line with the new Bill to be drafted.

Under the forthcoming Bill, FRT would only be used retrospectively to search images – which they already do manually – and which are already legally in the possession of An Garda Síochána.

It is proposed that An Garda Síochána would use those images and categories of images which they are already legally entitled to maintain to run FRT against, when authorised to do so.

Minister McEntee said:

"Time is so often of the essence in investigations. Gardaí need to be able to search for suspects and evidence quickly – there may be a suspect in a murder; a child who is missing or abducted or a child subject to abuse.

"A current Garda investigation now can involve teams of Gardaí spending several months trawling through thousands of hours of CCTV footage manually, potentially to find only a short few clips which can lead to the identification of a suspect or a victim.

"In a digital age, murder investigations can include thousands of hours of footage that needs to be analysed by Gardaí. In one murder investigation, 42,000 hours of CCTV from 150 locations had to be manually analysed by a team of Gardaí. Such uses of FRT, in particular, represent substantial advances in terms of efficiency, accuracy and even privacy.

"For children who are victims of child abuse, it is often the case that the only way to identify them is by consulting investigation databases of child abuse images and comparing images. Some of these dreadfully abusive images may be years old, but some may be new images of children being abused today. Facial recognition technology is essential when examining these international databases which can contain millions of records. French law enforcement have provided examples of FRT being used to successfully identify and prosecute perpetrators in rape, child sexual assaults and burglary cases.

"I firmly believe that bodycams and FRT are required to ensure that An Garda Síochána is a fully equipped, modern police service operating in a digital age, but I also acknowledge that some people hold legitimate concerns around the use of such technology.

"That's why we will introduce a number of safeguards – such as banning mass surveillance and profiling – and ensuring the code of practice for the use of FRT will be subject to approval by Government and the Houses of the Oireachtas. Live FRT will not be permitted under this Bill.

"I would like to acknowledge the positive engagement I have had with my colleagues in Government on this issue since I first proposed it over a year ago, following discussions with the Commissioner.

"I would particularly like to thank my colleague Minister Simon Harris for his diligent work in advancing the policy proposals and continuing that engagement during his period as Minister for Justice in recent months."

The new FRT Bill will undergo pre-legislative scrutiny by the Oireachtas Justice committee, which will be able to invite experts in this complex area to discuss its provisions.

Other safeguards include that trained Gardaí will make the final decisions on the use of evidence identified using FRT. There will be no automated decision making.

Further consideration and consultation will now be held as part of the legislative process on the new Bill to discuss the appropriate safeguards to address these concerns.

Minister McEntee will return to Cabinet with heads of this Bill very shortly after the summer recess, with a full Bill expected to be published by the end of the year.

Notes

No additional powers to collect, retain or process images, other than those already in laws or provided for under the existing provisions of this Bill are proposed. This means, for example, the scraping of open source images from social media will not be permitted, nor will the purchase of commercial databases against which FRT could be run.

The use of other public service databases, such as the Public Services Card and passport images by the Gardaí for FRT will not be permitted.

Rules around how long images will be retained will be addressed in the Code of Practice, which will be subject to approval by Government and the Houses of the Oireachtas. Existing law already provides for the destruction of images in circumstances where an arrested person is not charged or acquitted and establishes the time limits in which this must be done. This is in line with the Guidelines of the European Data Protection Board which states that the data minimisation principle requires that any video material not relevant to the purpose of the processing should always be removed or anonymised (for example: by blurring with no retroactive ability to recover the data).

Additional rules relating to the operation of FRT on images held shall be set out in the relevant Code of Practice, and FRT cannot become operational without the Code of Practice being agreed.

A High Court Judge will also report annually to An Taoiseach on retrospective FRT use by An Garda Síochána. The government will lay a copy of the report before each of the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Data protection

The European Data Protection Board adopted guidelines for the ethical and safe use of Retrospective FRT in April 2023.

The EDPB are the experts in data protection and include the data protection commissioner from every EU MS, including Ireland.

The FRT Bill will be drafted in line with these guidelines. The Data Protection Commissioner in Ireland will also be consulted once the heads of the new Bill are agreed by Government.

Safeguards

The Minister is proposing that a number of safeguards will be included in the Bill:

- all use of FRT, other than those provided for in law, will be prohibited
- mass surveillance and profiling will be prohibited
- codes of practice, subject to human rights and data protection impact assessments will be required

- no automated decision making permitted with trained Garda personnel taking the final decision
- High Court Judge to report annually on the operation of the provisions

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