

****Check against delivery**

Commencement Matter CM_702/23 – 21 November 2023

Senator Victor Boyhan

To ask the Minister for Justice to make a Statement on the role that she envisages for City and County Councillors on the proposed Local Community Safety Partnerships.

Opening speech

I would like to thank the Senator for raising this matter in the House today.

And in particular I would like to thank Senator Boyhan for giving me the opportunity to correct some of the misinformation that has been put about this important piece of legislation which I believe is absolutely central to us building stronger, safer communities.

To build stronger, safer communities, people must be safe feel safe in their own communities.

And a strong community is one which has a real say in how to improve their local areas – because nobody knows better than a community what needs to be done in their area.

This approach goes far beyond the traditional policing response. It is not just the responsibility of An Garda Síochána alone, although high visibility policing is absolutely central to it.

It requires all relevant state bodies and voluntary organisations - as well as councillors and local community and business groups - to work together in a joined-up way, in partnership with the local community, to prioritise and effectively address issues in their own area.

The Local Community Safety Partnerships are provided for in Part 3 of the Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill 2023 which I hope will come before the House shortly for Committee Stage debate.

It is worth noting that the proposals that are now in the Bill in this area have already been approved by Dáil Éireann. Prior to that, the proposals were included in the General Scheme of the Bill which was the subject of an extensive pre legislative scrutiny process over 2021 and 2022.

These Partnerships will operate at local authority level and they will replace Joint Policing Committees (JPCs).

They will serve as a forum for discussion – and more importantly, as a key driver of action in their communities to increase safety. They will be required to publish and implement a community safety plan. It is also important to say that funding will be available for these partnerships. Each of the Pilots have benefited from the Community Safety Innovation Fund, which I established, and Budget 2024 provides further investment.

The Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill will place statutory obligations on Departments and other public service bodies to cooperate with each other to improve community safety.

The Partnerships will have a wider membership than JPCs and will include residents, community representatives (including representatives of young people, older people, new and minority communities), business and education representatives and a range of public services including the HSE, Tusla, AGS and the local authority.

Local councillors will remain a very important part of the make-up of these new fora.

As Senators will be aware, pilot partnerships are currently running in Longford, Waterford and Dublin North Inner City.

They have all drafted Community Safety Plans which show the real value of inputs from a wide range of stakeholders.

For example, in Dublin, business groups suggested the idea of Community Safety Wardens; while Dublin City Council committed to improving public lighting and the streetscape.

In Longford, Longford County Council committed to installing additional CCTV cameras and the Community Safety Partnership receives regular updates and give feedback on the rollout of cameras.

In Waterford, the HSE committed to increasing harm reduction information in pubs and clubs, youth clubs.

These are just a handful of actions among many across three community safety plans.

There are 6-7 local councillors on each of these pilots, chosen from amongst their own ranks.

When establishing the pilots, it is important to note, that the approach adopted in terms of membership mirrored that of other local government committee structures, such as the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), where not all local councillors are members.

The Bill currently before the Seanad does not specify the composition of each partnership but provides that this will be a matter for the Minister for Justice to set up through secondary legislation. This is a more flexible approach that will also allow future changes to be made based on the experience on the ground.

I have always said that nobody knows better than a local community how to improve safety in their area. That is why it is important that each partnership will be appropriately sized. There will be a partnership established in each local authority area, and it will be possible for a partnership to establish further sub-committees to cover specific areas.

Preparatory work is underway within my Department on developing these regulations.

An independent evaluation had been undertaken since the pilot partnerships commenced, and the report of the evaluation is now being finalised. It will greatly inform our next steps, including the development of a national strategy for community safety partnerships.

While I anticipate that the local representative make-up of the new partnerships will be similar to the pilots for reasons I've already outlined, I am acutely aware of the need for input from local councillors, and how important it is they have contact with their local Gardaí.

Mechanisms will also be developed to ensure that all local councillors are fully briefed on developments at the Local Community Safety Partnerships.

Under the pilot scheme, each partnership holds at least one meeting every year which is open to the public so as allow engagement with the work of the partnerships. The frequency of those meetings can be looked at in the context of the findings from the final evaluation.

It is important to state that throughout the pilot process, consistent engagement has taken place with the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) and the County and City Management Association (CCMA).

My department have also held webinars and information sessions to which JPC members were invited.

To conclude, I want to assure all Senators that the views and input of the community, including councillors, will help to inform the national roll-out of the community safety strategy.