



'HOW BODY WORN CAMERAS CAN HELP SAFE POLICING'

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FOOTAGE captured by body-worn cameras provide “the best evidence available” when giving evidence to a court case or assisting the DPP in deciding appropriate charges, according to GRA Vice President Brendan O’Connor.

The Garda Síochána (Digital Recording) Bill 2021 has now been brought to government – an important step in a process that will hopefully lead to the issue of cameras to operational gardaí.

This followed a 2018 report by the Commission on the Future of Policing which recommended the wearing of body-worn cameras by front line members for the protection of both gardaí and the public..

“The availability of body worn cameras has the potential to enhance member safety, protect against malicious and vexatious complaints and gather better evidence to assist in the prosecution and, ultimately, the conviction of offenders,” Mr O’Connor said in his column in the Garda Review.

“The increasing levels of assault against gardaí are well documented with almost 1,000 members assaulted in 2020. Members, like many other victims of crime, often express a frustration that penalties imposed on assailants are unduly lenient and do not reflect the severity of an attack.

“What body cameras do is allow the judges and juries to relive the experience of the assaulted officer from a unique viewpoint.

“Realtime footage of an out-of-control violent assailant may be a far cry from the soft spoken, well dressed individual presented by a polished and well-choreographed defence.

“The camera, after all, does not lie – as long as the chain of evidence is properly processed and protected.

“As gardaí we approach the debate around body worn cameras from the perspective of protecting ourselves and colleagues; however, the benefits also extend to victims of crimes that gardaí investigate,” O’Connor told the Review.

“As first responders, our members are often present at crime scenes in the immediate aftermath. The appropriate use of camera technology provides an impartial and clinical recollection of crime scenes, road traffic collisions and comments made by both victims and suspects.

“Such evidence is not subject to the same physiological and psychological factors that witness testimony can be influenced by – regarding the unreliability of the human cognitive functions, especially memory, in times of adrenaline and trauma.”

Such technology can also help in dealing with difficult domestic violence situations, he argues.

“There has been a significant increase in domestic violence recorded in Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic. Domestic violence is a crime that has devastating consequences for victims and has traditionally presented significant challenges from an investigation and prosecution perspective.

“People under the influence or control of an abusive partner who are suffering psychological, physical and emotional trauma may not always follow up with a statement of complaint making the decision to prosecute or not a difficult one.

“In the past, police officers have used instant film cameras to record injuries visible at the scene; the police body worn camera has the potential to capture the aftermath of a domestic violence situation – including the demeanour and attitude of both victim and perpetrator and often the destruction or damage to property at the scene.

“Police body worn cameras potentially can afford protection to the most vulnerable victims of crime at risk in what should be the sanctuary of their own home.”

But what about the issues of protection of privacy rights and the storage of such footage?

“Such concerns are entirely valid and need to be carefully considered. Those represented by the Garda Representative Association are members of a police service that polices with the consent of the Irish public and continues to enjoy a high level of public approval,” he continued.

“Any introduction of established technology that adds a layer of transparency to a style of policing that is subject to significant levels of oversight can only enhance the quality of service.

“While there will always be sensitivities around policing and security services recording and storing information and data relating to citizens, a clear policy document and set of procedures that ensure compliance with individual rights and GDPR should allay any fears.”

Mr O’Connor also said any concerns regarding the financial cost should be considered against the “considerable financial savings and efficiencies with a reduction in vexatious complaints and contested court cases all of which consume finite resources from within the justice budget. What we cannot put a price on is the reassurance they will give to members knowing that their actions and comments cannot be misrepresented or the validation they will bring to the rights of domestic violence victims”.

See The Garda Review for the full interview.