

GRA to carry out no-confidence ballot on Commissioner

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The Garda Representative Association (GRA) is to ballot its membership on a vote of no confidence in Garda Commissioner Drew Harris, with a special delegate conference to be held to discuss the result.

This two-step course of action emerged as the response of the executive council of the GRA, which represents about 11,000 rank-and-file Gardaí, to last week's announcement by Commissioner Harris that the national police force will revert to its pre-Covid roster system from November 6 next.

In a message to GRA members after the executive meeting last Wednesday, July 26, the association said that the special delegate conference would be convened before November 6, which means it will meet in advance of the planned change in roster.

The association told members that the vote was prompted by issues it believes the Commissioner "has failed to address", including: the recruitment and retention crisis; issues "created by the lack of appropriate training"; welfare and wellbeing of members "created by the above"; current suspensions policy; "constant red tape and bureaucracy employed"; and the recent announcement of the return of the pre-Covid roster.

While a range of issues have been cited as leading to the ballot of no confidence, GRA interim general secretary Ronan Slevin made it clear on RTE Radio this week that it was the roster announcement that was the 'final straw' leading to the move.

Before 2020, most Gardaí were on a roster agreed at the 'Westmanstown' talks in 2012, of six 10-hour shifts, followed by four recovery/rest days. The onset of Covid-19 led to a 'contingency' roster of four 12-hour shifts, followed by four rest days.

Many Gardaí object to reverting to the 'Westmanstown' roster, as it means more and shorter work days, giving rise to extra commuting and childcare costs. The GRA also argues that it will reduce the number of Gardaí available at any one time – noting that the Commissioner himself had referred to this difficulty last year.

However, Commissioner Harris said last week that the Garda roster system has to serve the public, support the most vulnerable in society, ensure the health and wellbeing of Gardaí and allow the efficient and effective management of the force within the budget available, concluding that the Covid-19 roster "no longer meets those criteria".

UNUSUAL MOVE

It is unusual for a union or representative association to carry out a ballot of no confidence in a senior manager and it is not clear what the consequences would be. It is different to the Dáil voting no confidence in a senior politician, for example.

While some in the GRA may hope that it may encourage the Commissioner to resign, there will be wariness of what precedent that would set. The Commissioner is accountable to the Government, not to the members of the force.

Given that Gardaí are barred from taking industrial action, a 'no-confidence' ballot could serve the function of allowing GRA members to express their frustration, while remaining within the law.

However, it is not clear how it helps the parties to build the trust necessary to negotiate a new rosters agreement, with roster talks at an impasse for six months now.