

Official Opening of Athlumney House, Navan 31st October 2008

It is a great pleasure for me to be here this morning in Navan at Athlumney House to mark the official opening of the decentralised offices of the Garda Civilian Human Resources Directorate, the Probation Service Head Office and the Coroners Service Implementation Team. I am also pleased to welcome Chief Superintendent Padraic Rattigan and his colleagues in the Meath Division of An Garda Síochána and I wish them well in their work here.

Today marks another milestone in my Department's decentralisation programme, a programme which will eventually see over nine hundred posts transferred from twelve agencies to seven locations around the country. I am delighted to say that we now have a presence in all the seven towns encompassed by the programme. Almost sixty per cent of the posts have been filled and five hundred and fifty people have moved into their new jobs within the Justice and Equality family. This is an extremely positive response and is reflected in the success of the Government programme nationwide where over 2,500 posts have already moved to thirty-five locations. As you are no doubt aware, the Government recently reviewed the overall programme in the context of the Budget Statement and identified a number of priority elements. The outcome of this review is that, in the coming years, the overall total will rise and around 6,000 civil and public service jobs will move to 40 locations. Despite the negative comments we hear from time to time, our experience has shown that the decentralisation process has been a positive and rewarding process for all involved.

The new Garda Civilian HR Directorate, which is now operating from Navan, was established in October 2006 to provide human resource support to all the civilian staff in An Garda Síochána. This took place following the formal transfer of the staff from my Department to the Garda Commissioner under the Garda Síochána Act 2005. There are currently thirty-six staff in the Directorate, all of whom relocated to Navan under the Government's Decentralisation programme.

The Directorate manages all aspects of human resource management and development. This includes recruitment, training, performance management, pay and general HR administrative functions for over 2,500 clerical, administrative, professional, technical and industrial civilian staff working within An Garda Síochána.

The Directorate is also playing a key role in driving forward an important initiative for the Government which is the Civilianisation Programme within the Gardaí. This programme will ensure that our civilian support structures are in line with international best practice and enable the greatest possible number of front line Garda members to focus on core policing work. This is a key element in our fight against crime. Significant progress has been made in the recruitment of additional civilian staff. The numbers have increased by 60% in the past two years and now stand at just over 2000.

It is important to note that we have moved dramatically from an era when civilian staffing was almost exclusively confined to clerical support in Garda stations around the country and in Garda Headquarters. An Garda Síochána is now a rapidly changing

organisation in which civilians are being appointed to an ever wider range of managerial and administrative roles and specialist functions. So far, appointments have been made to the positions of Chief Administrative Officer, Executive Director of ICT, Director of Communications and Head of Legal Affairs. A significant number of other senior and middle management civilian posts have also been created in areas such as HR, Finance, Procurement, IT, Housing, Transport, Crime & Policing Analysis and Internal Audit.

The invaluable support being provided to the Force by civilian staff has helped us to kick start successful flagship initiatives such as the Garda Information Services Centre, the Central Vetting Unit and the Fixed Charge Processing Office. This has led to an increased recognition of the potential benefits of even further civilianisation, with more proposals now being developed across a range of key support areas.

The management and staff of the HR Directorate, under Alan Mulligan's leadership, deserve credit for the huge effort they have made in developing their HR knowledge and skills over a very short space of time. Indeed, many of the staff would have had minimum HR experience prior to joining the Directorate. Their hard work and professionalism has assisted in the smooth and successful transition of responsibility for Garda civilian staff from my Department to the Garda Commissioner. On behalf of the Commissioner and myself, I want to thank them for their continued dedication and commitment to providing a quality HR service to their civilian colleagues throughout the organisation.

The offices we are officially opening here this morning are 'home' to a range of criminal justice bodies including the Probation Service who have established their Head Office here. I am pleased that the Director, Michael Donnellan and his team have settled in to this fine building.

The Probation Service has, of course, a proud history of working from offices right across the country. They are no strangers to decentralisation. The move of their Headquarters to Navan is very much in keeping with the ethos of the organisation to bring support services to local communities. Today the Probation Service employs nearly 500 staff including administrative grades and community service supervisors. The Service footprint extends to all 26 counties, it is available to every court in the land exercising criminal jurisdiction and has staff working in all prisons and places of detention.

I recently launched the 2007 Annual Report of the Probation Service and opened its new Dublin offices in Haymarket. That report marked a century of transformation and challenge for the Probation Service since the legislation of 1907. More recently, the Service has been going through a process of intense change and modernisation to ensure that it is making best use of resources and meeting client needs in the most appropriate way.

Organisational change can only be successful with the support of staff. Before today, having already met some of the staff at the Haymarket opening, it is clear that personnel at all levels have embraced the challenges which change brings. They have moved to implement innovative work practices but also to grasp new opportunities in their own professional lives. Moving the HQ here is an example of a forward looking

organisation taking the opportunity to work outside of Dublin without any diminution in the delivery of a high quality service to the courts, the prisons and other key stakeholders. I want to wish Michael Donnellan and his team here in Navan every success in your important work.

This building is also "home" to the Coroners Service Implementation Team headed by Sandra Smith. I am delighted to welcome here today members of the Coroners Society including their President, Professor Denis Cusack. I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation and that of the Government for the work which our coroners carry out every day around the country with great professionalism and sensitivity.

The role of the coroner as an independent death investigator is a very important and necessary one. The service provided by coroners throughout the State is continuing to gain in relevance. Your work receives extensive media coverage as society has become more demanding in its need and desire for explanation of sudden or unnatural deaths. This is not always an easy task when you are faced with the horrendous circumstances of death. I am also aware of the sensitivity in which you seek to deal with inquests, particularly in relation to tragic circumstances including suicide. The coroner service provides explanations, in light of the circumstances of death, to those left bereaved but the service also highlights matters of public interest ranging from health issues to safety matters. This is an immense contribution which Government and all policy makers can take advantage of and which can inform their policy decisions.

Significant obligations are imposed on the coroner through our Constitution, our statute and common law, as well as the human rights context in which coroners operate. I think few would deny that demands on the service are changing and the current service is fractured in structure and needs updating. The response of the Government has been to publish the Coroners Bill. The aim of the legislation is to bring about greater consistency of practice and service by coroners on a national basis in order to meet all the demands of a modern society.

Let me also say that I very much appreciate the continued involvement of coroners in the modernisation process and their interaction with my Department. In order to move matters forward, I have established an implementation team within my Department to effect the transition process for an enhanced coroner service. This Unit is now operational and is situated here in Athlumney House. I wish them every success in their future work.

As regards the Decentralisation Programme, the Government we will continue to ensure the delivery of the Programme in line with the target dates as they emerge. I am confident that the programme will continue to be of benefit to all concerned, organisations and individuals, towns and communities. I am particularly pleased to be in Navan today and to have had the opportunity to meet the staff. I am sure that everyone here today needs no convincing that Navan is "only an hour from Dublin". However, I am equally certain that the staff now working here are happy not to be required to test that theory on a daily basis. Can I therefore take this opportunity to wish you and your families every happiness in Navan and every success in your future careers within the Justice and Equality family.

Can I now conclude by congratulating Tommy Lynch and his colleagues, Corramore Construction and AEM on the fine job they have done on this building. From my walk around this morning, I can see that they have successfully moulded the old with the new. With the able assistance of all the officials in the Office of Public Works and their architect, Andrea Fox, the State has been able to retain all the fine architectural features of Athlumney House, while at the same time delivering excellent and environmentally friendly office accommodation.

Can I also acknowledge the presence here today of Mary Malone whose family bought Athlumney House seventy years ago. Mary lived in the house for over thirty years and now lives across the river from Athlumney. I hope that you and your family are pleased that the house is now restored and fully occupied as a vibrant part of the local working community.

With no further ado, I would like to now declare Athlumney House officially open.