

Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland
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Dear Chairperson

Thank you for this opportunity to put forward views on the Future of Policing in Ireland.

This document is submitted on behalf of the Fingal Public Participation Network (FPPN) Community Representatives Members of the Fingal Joint Policing Committee (JPC) and as informed by the FPPN Community Safety Linkage Group (CSLG). Areas addressed are as set out in the Table of Contents below:

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Commitment to Community or Neighbourhood Policing

Our key priority as Community Representatives Members of the Fingal JPC, which we have emphasised, is ensuring that there is a full recognition of the importance of Community or Neighbourhood Policing and that it is a key commitment of an Garda Síochána to provide for and maintain appropriate support resources to Community or Neighbourhood Policing. This service is vital in policing and its importance and success is well documented both in Ireland and in other jurisdictions where kids at risk are diverted to positive activities, where there's a reduction in crime and people can be safe in their neighbourhoods.

At the public meeting hosted by the Commission last week in Blanchardstown I emphasised that our community representative group on the JPC had identified this as a major priority and that Community Policing should be properly and adequately resourced and supported, with continuity planning for building up and passing on expertise as the Gardai develop and move on in their career paths. I pointed out that neighbourhood police are taken off their roles for periods of time,

with no replacements, while assisting in other areas that have been identified as priority areas. I also cited the current situation with the Community Sergeant in the Blanchardstown District being reassigned on other duties while her role is being overseen by the Community Sgt in Finglas.

Serious consideration should be given to whether the structure of the Garda Síochána should be compartmentalised or separated on the lines, for example, of an area/department/force dealing with general policing that would include neighbourhood policing, traffic, "ordinary" crime, motoring. A separate force or organisation should deal with the current Garda role in national security, protection of Government and so on, and organised crime/gangland/CAB issues and that these areas should not routinely take from the resources and the supports that should be provided and reserved for general policing particularly in areas of community policing, juvenile liaison and Anti-social behaviour issues (including more emphasis on the commencement of the ASBO process as a matter of routine and then further supported as the procedure continues in its progress and beyond if necessary).

We have been told that while community policing is seen as a priority numbers are currently not sufficient in these units throughout the country because of staffing issues. No alternative has been offered in order to reconnect this important relationship between An Garda Síochána and the Community. If the Gardai can't always come out to the community then mechanisms should be devised to facilitate communities coming to the Gardai.

Neighbourhood Watch Groups

There should be a development of a Data Base of registered Neighbourhood Watch Groups, this could be partly facilitated by PPN's (Public Participation Networks) and the groups that are registered with the PPN as such.

Regular meetings should be held with a representative from each group in a particular area coming together with their Community Gardaí in the local station. Groups would have the opportunity to network with one another developing further their sense of community while being given relevant local information and advice by the Gardaí.

This system is being used in some stations such as Blanchardstown but not enough have adopted this approach of information sharing.

See also comments in the Recruitment and Training section below that are very relevant to this heading also.

Recruitment and Training

On proposing a change to the recruitment programme in a strategic sense recruits should be taken in on a general course of basic policing skills. Subsequent stages of the training programme would be where the recruits are streamlined into more specialised areas of resource planning.

For instance, after basic training, recruits would move to a "Patrol Officer" programme of training – with further enhancements to the career path/ grades. Other recruits from the basic course could move to specialised units, IT, Accountancy, Crime Scene Specialists, even into the Detective and Supervisory Management branches.

The students could be directly recruited on the basis of their skills, education and chosen area of expertise and career preferences. They would opt on recruitment / application for specialised areas on the enhanced training programme – this would be designed selection and recruitment as part of the manpower requirements and plan.

Direct recruitment could also be carried out at middle grade/rank level seeking candidates with particular skills and qualifications in specialised areas such as IT, Accountancy, and Management and Organisational skills, and so on, and receive the necessary in-house training in relation to criminal legislation, rules of evidence and related issues. Similar type specialist recruitment outside the traditional entry grades is already well established in the Civil Service with Revenue as a leading example in this regard.

Such an approach would ensure a high calibre of intake and also ensure an enduring effective workforce. Many may opt for “Patrol Officer” programme and career, but also many others may join An Garda Síochána with expertise knowing that their skills are appreciated and made use of in a worthy and effective manner.

Career Path Opportunities and Grades Progression

The effect of under resourcing, as we've seen in place for the past decade, is primarily felt on operational units with the resultant effect on the policing deliverables to members of the public.

In order to keep effective “Patrol Officers” there needs to be a retention and development plan. At the moment operational “Patrol Officers” are promoted out of operational patrol work into other sections. Whilst suiting and benefiting the other sections, it reduces the number of experienced “Patrol Officers” on the operational units. The numbers may be increased but with new recruits filling the places who will not necessarily have the skills and experience of those they numerically replace.

If a new system of grades for “Patrol Officers” were introduced, it would ensure that people who are effective and interested in operational patrol work as a career, would be rewarded and compensated for their experience and dedication by promotion within the normal operational sectors / regular patrol work.

An example of this would be a grade progression from Recruit – Patrol Officer – Senior Patrol Officer- Section Leader-Patrol Sergeant- Patrol Supervisory. Effective “Patrol Officers” would progress through the ranks, keeping them in the operational sphere. Through performance management appraisal officers would progress in the organisation yet be retained for their skills and commitment – and be rewarded for their contribution.

Community Policing for 2-3 years should be a part of Patrol Officer training, learning the job out in the community, and would provide numerous benefits for the development Garda knowledge and expertise.

Information Technology or Digital Innovation

The Commission on the Future of Policing has already identified in one of its 5 core principles that the use of information technology in an Garda Síochána is "generations behind" . This became very painfully clear in a prolonged but very revealing conversation with the Commission expert Antonio Oftelia with expertise in the digital innovation area. The following shortcomings were identified:

Garda reliance on paperwork and paper records,
Gardai have to return to the Station at the end of shift to complete and file their paper records.
There is no facility for Gardai to submit their reports and statements remotely on-line either by way of email, use of in-car laptops or smartphones,

Gardai queuing to also enter their paper record work on the Pulse system,
The lack of effectiveness of Pulse,
The drain from other IT developments to deal with multiple fixes and ad-hoc additions to Pulse,
The lack of information databases and access to them,
The policy of not using technology in communications and access to information databases.
Gardai cannot use smartphone technology though a recent pilot is in place in Limerick - use of smart phones to access information in real time on the beat and in road stops,
The prohibition on the use of email is very difficult to understand. Civil Service staff do not operate under such antiquated restrictions that it is very difficult to understand what reason there could be for this restriction on Garda use of email.

It is our belief that the way forward is to resource the Gardai with the necessary IT infrastructure to enable the force to have a system wide remote access to real time databases of information that are particularly relevant to the operational needs of the Garda officers in their daily work.

The development and role out of mobile and static Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) system such as is in place in the UK, including Northern Ireland, is a key requirement to enable effective and efficient policing. Such an implementation would lead to the removal of the need to have scrap paper on car windscreens with information on motor tax, NCT and insurance that are only accessible by Gardai stopping cars and leaning over car windscreens in all weathers (with torches in darkness) and peering at shrivelled up misplaced paper scraps. This would also enable the exchequer to save costs associated in printing and posting of the paper stuff and eliminate the prospect of forgeries. It could even lead to a reduction in the costs of insurance and NCT. While the statistics available indicate that seizures of motor vehicles are increasing, how much more effective would it be for Garda operations to have the modern resource of an information technology with updated and real time access to databases containing motor tax, driver details, insurance details, offences/convictions, outstanding warrants and used in reported crime elsewhere?

Investment and training in the latest technology

Every station should have access to and use AFIS and Facial Recognition at every opportunity. One example of such usage would relate to the current practice where offenders required to sign on as part of bail conditions present to their designated station and physically sign a book with a pen. Information from the various pages is then transferred later in the day (time permitting) to the data base. When offenders present to the station the use of an IT method would quickly verify the ID by Facial or Fingerprint technology and signature recorded in real time on the system with an automatic alert if the offender has not signed in as required, by the appointed time. Another example is that statements taken in the station are still taken down in handwriting, signed and then typed up at the first opportunity by civilian staff trying to read someone else's writing, or by the members themselves setting aside time from their police patrol/role to transcribe. This is an ineffective and even wasteful use of time and resources and leads to underperformance and delays in responses to calls from the public.

Investment in a proper Dispatch System

To include 999, 112 emergency numbers and a Central 101 Report line for non emergency response which would be used for non emergency reporting of, for example to report the occurrence of antisocial behaviour in a particular location, report suspicious activity. There are

many complaints that Garda Station phone numbers are not answered despite the public being repeatedly urged to report concerns via 999 or 112.

- Details taken, logged, reference number given etc.,
- Full audit system, Neighbour Watch follow up,
- Training of civilians for the 3 Dispatch Centres in Galway, Dublin and Cork needs to have the full support of members in An Garda Síochána so that their knowledge and expertise is passed on and not lost,
- Training needs to be provide in more than a question and answer system,
- A proper dispatch system should also include response cars.

Development of CCTV Networks

While there are private, local authority and grant aided community CCTV projects in certain areas in the country there needs to be an overall plan and structure for the role out of CCTV, properly managed and maintained under the remit of the Gardai, operating in accordance with Data Protection legislation. This could be in conjunction with the role out of an ANPR fixed point cctv system. Overall coordination and control would be under the responsibility of An Garda Síochána but the screen and camera monitors need not be themselves Gardai but could be civilian staff of the organisation, such as is already the case in many areas where civilians are part of the police staffing infrastructure.

Garda Reserves

Garda Reserves have not been fully embraced by the ordinary members and senior management. There is no progression structure if remaining with the reserves and not continuing to become a full-time member.

There are reserves who are completing their 11th year of service with no reserve rank or recognition. A number of these men and women work full time in industry, commerce, IT, management and bring a wealth of experience and knowledge that is not being utilised. The potential benefits of a fully supported reserve force of dedicated members of our own communities have not been adequately recognised nor fully identified, developed or utilised effectively. Addressing the deficit in this area needs to be a feature component of the Future of Policing in Ireland.

Other Initiatives

Other initiatives should be considered as follows:

Divert administrative Gardai to policing operations and away from their desks,

Use civilian staff with qualifications for administrative functions currently being undertaken by serving Gardai who have effectively been removed from policing areas and also in specialist areas such as financial services investigations where the power of arrest cannot be used as an excuse not to have a Garda in the role in question,

Generally, the civilianisation of all roles in the Garda Síochána that do not require Garda powers to be exercised, should be implemented and release the Gardai to policing operations. The effect of this would be, in a relatively short space of time, increase the number of operational Gardai to operational policing work.

Gardai should not be required to witness or certify document applications or forms such as passport application forms. Instead this responsibility should fall to Peace Commissioners (that's what they're appointed for and they live in the community).

All other non-Garda work, including supplying application forms to the community, should be diverted to public libraries, and the appropriate responsible public bodies.

This list is not exhaustive.

Secrecy and the “need to know”.

This seems to be recognised and reported as one of the current big problems to be overcome in any future for policing in Ireland. While our group has no information on this aspect we would be concerned that this notion could restrict the flow of confidential information that could be necessary for an operational Garda in an ordinary policing role to know before entering into any situation where knowledge of that information could save the Officer's life.

Joint Policing Committees

The Garda Síochána Act 2005. Joint Policing Committees Guidelines- Amended August 2014
We would strongly support these guidelines and would further state that following these guidelines would be of benefit to all parties. In particular in relation to:

1.4 It is essential that JPCs take a strategic approach to their work so that issues arising can be dealt with in a considered and properly coordinated manner. Conversely, the business of a JPC cannot be progressed by simply having an exchange of views on relevant Garda or local authority reports. It is imperative that local issues are addressed collectively and strategically and in this regard each JPC must have strategic plans which are focussed on achieving coordinated actions to support enhanced policing and crime prevention. Templates for JPC work plans are included in Appendix 2. These include a Six Year Strategic Plan designed to link with the Local Economic and Community Plan for the area and an Annual Plan which will include objectives derived from the relevant Annual Policing Plans.

Training

3.1 Training should be on a collective basis. It should give participants a thorough knowledge of the potential of the JPCs and the role and responsibilities of members, thereby enabling them to operate the JPCs to their full potential and in the spirit of partnership.

As Community Representative Members of Fingal Joint Policing Committee we are not convinced that this JPC is working in accordance with guidelines, critically those quoted above, and that it is not as effective in identifying strategic initiatives as it should be. After more than 3 years of FPPN representatives being involved we have not departed much from the talking shop that must have been in place before our arrival. Agreed actions or initiatives are few and far between and the operation of the Committee is unusually formal and does not allow for discussion or debate on issues of concern without first having to endure a long formal notice process. As such, it does not encourage the involvement of representatives and perhaps even acts as a brake on participation. Even written questions and their responses cannot be raised at the Committee meeting and are ruled out of order. This does not allow for teasing out of responses that are either vague, not relevant or are downright evasions.

While our group has sought to include a JPC Community Representative on the Steering Group this has been flatly refused, citing guidelines in detail to show that there is no requirement for such and referencing that the County Councillors would want a representative on the Group also.

We would go as far as to suggest that a review of JPCs is conducted, with the guidelines in mind, which should identify formally that the structure is not being implemented as per the guidelines! A meaningful plan should be put in place to measure the implementation and monitoring of the JPCs.

Conclusion

In summary, these are the observations of the Community Representative Members of the Fingal Joint Policing Committee which also take into account the various concerns and issues highlighted at meetings of the Fingal Community Safety Linkage Group. We hope that our contribution can be of assistance to the Commission in its analysis and consideration of all the submissions within this Consultation when formulating its recommendations on the Future of Policing In Ireland. We wish the Commission the very best in its endeavours and we fervently hope that the recommendations will be implemented by Government to bring about a much needed change and improvement in policing in Ireland.

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on behalf of:

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