

Statement by Chairperson Kathleen O'Toole on the Commission of the Future of Policing Commission held its first meeting on Wednesday 24th May

First, let me start by saying I am delighted to be back in Ireland and profoundly honoured to have this opportunity to help shape the future of policing in this country. While it seems every generation of policing experiences its own crises and challenges, there is no question in my mind that the issues facing police today are of a magnitude unprecedented in recent times.

The demands that are placed on police today in all corners of the world are truly unparalleled in their range and complexity, whether dealing with the scourge of drugs and organised crime, rapidly changing societies and communities, the backdrop of limited resources, or addressing terrorist threats at home and abroad, as we saw again so tragically two nights ago in Manchester.

At the same time, at no point in recent history has it been so clear that sweeping change is needed, at a core, systemic level, to the organizational and administrative structures of government and police agencies in order to meet these, and other emerging, critical demands. This is by no means a situation unique to Ireland. Across the UK, Australia, North America and other corners of the world, changing diplomatic, economic, and social dynamics are pushing governments and their police agencies to take a hard, critical look at how policing services are delivered and administered.

This morning, we met for the first time as the Commission tasked to undertake this review in Ireland. As I look around the table, it is remarkable to see the tremendous talent, breadth of experience, and knowledge that has been assembled to lead this mission forward. The members of this Commission include life-long public servants, academics, legal professionals, organizational consultants, and leaders in human rights and victims' rights.

While we may come from different backgrounds, and approach our task with unique perspectives, we all share an abiding and demonstrated commitment to true, lasting, and effective police reform. Many have set aside other obligations to join this team, and I want to take this opportunity to thank each of them for the enthusiasm they have already shown and commitment they have pledged over the next fifteen busy months.

One may reasonably ask what this Commission intends to do that other bodies have not already done. The answer is simple. We're not here to recreate the wheel. The good work that has been accomplished by the Policing Authority, the Inspectorate, the Ombudsman Commission, and the Garda Síochána itself to drive reform forward will all be considered. Processes that work well will be recognised and retained. Recommendations already made that meet or complement the demands of our remit will be acknowledged as such. Let me be clear from the start, our task is not to conduct performance reviews of individual actors, or to scrutinize particular incidents, or to audit discrete matters or performances. Our work is focussed on the whole. We are tasked with reviewing the system in its entirety – including but not limited to culture, ethics, recruiting, professional development, accountability, discipline, business practices, organizational structure and technology.

We will not be approaching this work through the prism of scandal and accusation but in a strategic way that will allow us to examine the fundamentals of and challenges facing Irish policing.

To the community, this is YOUR commission. More importantly this is YOUR police service. A community's trust, respect, engagement and support of its police are, without question, essential to modern, effective, and ethical policing.

The foundation for achieving community trust must be built on transparency. I pledge to you that our process will be a highly visible, transparent endeavour.

In return, I ask for your engagement and contributions to the process. I promise to you that we will listen. I ask that you join us at community meetings, if you are able. We will establish electronic means of communicating with us, and I ask that you use them. I ask for your thoughts, your frustrations, your experiences, and your ideas.

You deserve to have a policing service that meets the unique demands of your individual communities; work with us to achieve that aim.

To the men and women of the Garda Síochána, this work is for you as well. An Garda Síochána is approaching its 100th anniversary. Its members have served with dedication and courage over the decades with some, sadly, having made the ultimate sacrifice. Around the country, you are overwhelmingly supported by the majority of the Irish people, and the hard work you do, day in and day out, to help those in need, to keep Ireland's communities safe, must continue to be recognized.

Whether sworn or civilian, you deserve a service that provides you with the direction, training, and equipment to do your jobs effectively. You deserve a service that is built on best practices, that provides you with the skills and confidence to navigate situations that most people will never experience.

You have the most complete understanding of the challenges you face in your jobs. We respect your experiences, and want to hear directly from you.

Let me end by commenting on the scope of this project. Though it may sound Herculean, it need not be so. As I said before, the challenges that face Irish policing are the same as those faced by police services around the world. I know from experience that hard work, disciplined focus, and true collaboration can lead to remarkable results, and in short order.

This review will culminate in a comprehensive report and recommendations for systemic change that will reflect the breadth and gravity of our remit, but we will be a dynamic commission. I am pleased that the Terms of Reference allow us to bring forward recommendations on a rolling basis, and in the coming weeks we intend to direct significant attention to issues that call for immediate proposals.

There is much to be accomplished over the next 15 months, but together, we will get this done, and we will get this done right.

