

**SUBMISSION
TO
COMMISSION
ON THE
FUTURE OF POLICING
IN IRELAND**

**SUBMISSION BY
MICHAEL FITZMAURICE T.D.**

January 2018.

INTRODUCTION:

I welcome this opportunity to make a submission to the "Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland". I submit this submission in the knowledge that many people, groups and agencies will be making contributions and will be addressing many different aspects of the very broad role that is included in the umbrella of activities that fall are encapsulated in the role of An Garda Síochána. As a representative of a rural constituency I intend to address the problems associated with policing within the rural community.

I also make this submission in the knowledge that An Garda Síochána have a proud tradition of service within rural communities. A tradition that extends back to the formation of the "Guardians of the Peace" and in rural areas this has been epitomised by a very close relationship between the local Garda and members of the community. This close relationship was built on very firm foundations as the Garda station was usually central to each rural community. The close relationship was based on mutual respect. The Garda was, and was seen as a valued member of the local community.

I am worried that in many communities that close relationship that has existed within rural communities with their local Garda has been eroded and in many cases completely decimated by the closure of rural Garda Stations and the destruction of the close personal links that existed between the Communities and their local Garda.

"Agricultural Crime in Ireland" is a report recently compiled by the Waterford Institute of Technology on behalf of the Irish Cattle Sheep Farmers' Association (ICSA) who say that this is the first time that crime and the effects of crime have been measured within the farming communities. According to their research two-thirds of farmers have been victims of crime.

According to this survey by Waterford IT, damage to property and theft are the most common types of offence experienced by landowners, while fraud and assault are also reported in a sample of 861 agricultural households surveyed between January 2014 and May 2016. Neither violence nor arson is found to be a statistically significant feature among the experiences of farmers, their families or workers. However, about 40 per cent have had property stolen, and the report notes a high level of repeat targeting. There were a total of 652 incidents of theft reported by 351 respondents. Of these, 191 respondents experienced just a single incident, while the others had two or more incidents where property was stolen. Almost 40 per cent of participating farmers had experienced some kind of vandalism, criminal damage or trespass (VCDT).

Machinery, equipment and vehicles make up the majority of thefts (48 per cent), followed by chemicals and tools (32 per cent) and livestock and animal feed (19 per cent). When livestock are stolen or farm machinery is the target of robbers, it may sometimes be regarded as a crime that is less important than the crime we hear about in cities - but it is important to remember that thefts of livestock or farm machinery have a serious effect on the lives of their owners because it is not simply the financial loss that is at stake - but it can also have a very serious effect on the livelihood of the farm families.

Other rural organisations concur that lack of Gardaí manpower 'on the ground' in rural communities is a huge problem. Jer Bergin of the IFA says 'Garda visibility is the key to reassuring rural communities and', he says, 'the IFA was campaigning for increased Garda policing hours and presence in rural areas to tackle crime and create a greater sense of security in the countryside'.

'Age Action Ireland', head of advocacy, Justin Moran says "older people are generally less likely to be the victims of crime than the general public, but, fear of crime, particularly in rural communities, is rising and questions need to be asked about whether the gardaí have enough resources to effectively police rural Ireland,"

Rural affairs group Muintir na Tíre has also questioned the availability of gardaí on beat patrols in remote locations. Chief executive, Niall Garvey says "The gardaí need more resources and we would back them in that. When the rural Garda stations were closed we were promised that that would mean more gardaí available to be on the road. But... there hasn't been an increase in activity on the roads, it again shows the need for communities around the country to look out for each other. If we had doubled the Garda force we still

wouldn't have a Garda everywhere all the time so the community involvement is vital as well.”

The perception that there is a lack of Garda resources in rural areas is not limited to rural dwellers as representatives of the GRA in the Monaghan/Cavan division have stated, during 2017, that rural Ireland has been "decimated by cuts to policing and infrastructure since the onset of the crash".

In an Irish Examiner/ICMSA opinion poll in 2016 over 20% of farm families said that either they or a member of their immediate family had been a victim of crime in the previous year while 60% of those who responded to the poll felt that the Garda presence in rural Ireland was not adequate.

In 2009, the National Model of Community Policing was launched by the then Commissioner of An Garda Síochána: “I am committed to ensuring that a strong ‘ethos’ of ‘Community Policing’ is inculcated throughout the entirety of An Garda Síochána, which will result in an increased level of community partnerships, a more visible Garda presence and a reduction in crime and the fear of crime in our communities". There is a widespread perception in rural communities that Community policing, which a short while ago was being heralded as the tool to create safer communities and to reduce crime and the fear of crime, has been destroyed by the closure of Garda Stations and a reduction in the number of Gardaí.

Fear in the Countryside:

Representatives of people living in Rural areas repeatedly point to the lack of services once one leaves the larger urban areas. People may have to suffer lack of services but they should not have to suffer a situation where they don't feel safe in their own homes. There is a palpable sense of fear in many rural dwellers which has been exacerbated by the closure of Garda stations and the reduced numbers of Gardaí on the beat and this is leading to:

- People feeling more vulnerable.
- People feel less safe in their own homes.
- Rural people have become afraid.
- Rural people feel more isolated.
- The closure of stations has removed an essential part of the fabric of communities.
- Reports of crimes leads to stress and has a major emotional impact.
- People feel a deepening sense of threat.
- People have lost that direct personal link with Gardaí since stations closed.
- Local Gardaí in local stations gave a sense of security to people in rural areas.

FUTURE POLICING IN RURAL AREAS:

Future policing in Ireland requires strategies that will respond to the specific problems of rural areas. Community based Gardaí are the most effective means of policing rural areas. This is a strategy that has stood the test of time over generations and was built on a solid foundation of trust that was established between the local community and their local Gardaí. With the plan to increase the number of Gardaí over the coming years it is incumbent on the powers that be that increased numbers of Gardaí are based in rural communities giving a higher visibility in rural towns and villages.

COMMUNITY ALERT:

It is clear that communities are aware of the need to help themselves and to work in partnership with the Gardaí and this is evidenced by the network of 1,300 branches of "Community Alert" that have been established over the years. It is important that resources continue to put in place to resource and support this movement as it tries to respond to the changing times in rural areas. There is an awareness that many homes are empty during the day as people commute to work. People are more mobile but so are the criminals. Communications are improving all of the time but criminals are also using the latest technology to target homes and to identify vulnerable people.

MOBILE GARDA STATIONS:

In the absence of Garda stations in many of our towns and villages the advances in telecommunications should make it possible for Garda cars to be resourced so that they can fulfil a far greater role e.g. if Gardaí need to check information on a particular car they should be able to do that without having to call back to Garda information Centre.

TEXT ALERT:

The hunger among local communities to get involved in their own crime prevention strategy and their eagerness to join in partnership with the Gardaí is fully illustrated in the success of the "Text Alert" scheme which, in 2017, had 1,085 Text Alert schemes and a total of 191,181 individual subscribers. Roscommon-Longford had the third highest number of subscribers with 13,939. Sergeant Amanda Flood of the Garda Crime Prevention National Centre of Excellence, said: "The Text Alert scheme has grown from strength to strength over the past three years as more communities appreciate the value of setting up a scheme in their local area."

It is important that the Text alert system is fully resourced as it is a great example of the partnership that can exist between communities and the Gardaí. While there have been a number of notable successes using the Text Alert - it is also clear that the system has limitations and right across the country towns and villages are calling for the installation of cameras that will allow evidence to be collected that can lead to solving crimes.

CCTV:

It is fair to say that it is generally agreed that there has been insufficient investment in IT systems over the past decade. The hands of our Gardaí are effectively being tied behind their backs if we do not use every modern facility available to support them in their work and to provide the technical back-up that a modern force requires.

For years, local Gardaí have policed rural areas from very localised bases but this is no longer the case. It is clear to communities in every town and village that the Gardaí need technology to be the "eyes and ears" of the Gardaí twenty-four hours each day and seven days per week. The reality is that this technology is available in the form of Community CCTV cameras.

Dunmore in Co. Laois is just one example of where the crime statistics have fallen substantially over the course of a year following the installation of a modern set of CCTV cameras.

The government scheme to support community groups in installing CCTV systems has met with a poor response because small voluntary groups feel that the application form required is cumbersome and that it is difficult to obtain all of the permissions required. Community CCTV cameras have the potential to play a pivotal role in the security of our towns and villages and rural areas in the future. At the moment, local groups are expected to get permissions from the local Authority and the Joint Policing Committee as well as the consent of the Garda Commissioner.

Community CCTV cameras can play a major role in crime prevention and in the solving of crime but it requires that there is some joined up thinking and collective action to promote this strategy. I am proposing that the Joint Policing Committee in each local Authority area be required to take a proactive role in rolling out a system of community CCTV cameras to all the towns and villages within their respective areas.

GARDA SÍOCHÁNA:

There was a government decision in July of 2016 to increase the size of Garda Siochana to 21,000 personnel (15,000 sworn members, 4,000 civilians and 2,000 Garda reserves). It is essential that the Government follow through on this decision so that there is sufficient manpower available. It is also estimated that over the coming 5 years, 50% of the workforce will have five years experience or less. This poses a serious challenge for the force as it could lead to the loss of organisational memory and experience so it is important that sufficient training is put in place. In view of the number of Gardaí who are due to retire and the danger that so much valuable experience will be lost to the force it is time to consider if the 1,500 Gardaí, who are currently engaged in non-operational posts, could be released for frontline duties. It is also time to review the retirement age of Gardaí in line with other areas of the public service as this would enable the force to retain experienced members who have much to offer for an extra year or two.