



Background

Muintir na Tíre is the National Association for Community Development and was founded in 1937. In 1984, in response to high profile and particularly vicious crimes in rural Ireland, Muintir na Tíre held a number of public meetings. From these, Community Alert was formed, and has operated since.

Community Alert is a Crime Prevention and Community Safety programme and operates in partnership with An Garda Síochána. It is a very successful partnership, governed by a Memorandum of Understanding between both organisations (unique for An Garda Síochána), and operates with regular contact between both organisations. Community Alert has over 1,400 groups nationwide and has introduced many successful initiatives, such as Community Text Alert.

Submission

Community Policing - National

Muintir na Tíre believes that Community Policing is vital for crime prevention and that crime prevention is the most important and efficient element to policing overall. Community Policing also:

- Utilises the resources of the public in crime prevention. The public can become the “eyes and ears” of An Garda Síochána at almost no additional cost.
- Improves the image of An Garda Síochána, thus building the trust and respect that are so important, particularly in a largely unarmed force.

However, over the last number of years, the reduction in overall Garda resources has hit Community Policing particularly hard, at both national and local levels.

We believe Community Policing needs to be prioritised in any future structural changes. In particular:

- The National Bureau for Community Engagement urgently requires extra resources.
- The Bureau should also be given extra powers to ensure best practice is implemented nationwide.
- The Bureau should have the resources to provide adequate training for liaison Gardaí nationwide.
- Basic training in facilitation skills and the principles of Community Development would better enable members of An Garda Síochána to maximise their effectiveness in supporting these schemes.

Community Policing - Local

- Every community, and every Community Alert Group, should have a nominated liaison Garda and know how to contact them.
- It is essential that a clear management role exists at a District Level for overseeing the Community Crime Prevention schemes – Sergeant or Inspector level and that this role be prioritised as resources fluctuate.
- The Liaison performance of the Garda should be measured, and judged against a benchmark of engagement with community groups at meetings and efforts to improve local safety and security.
- Each Garda District Office should have a District Crime Prevention Plan, which should be reviewed annually and approved at each AGM.
- Each District should hold an AGM at least annually.
- As per the Community Crime Prevention Programmes Guidelines, It is advisable that District Meetings for representatives of Community Alert groups in each Garda District take place regularly (ideally every 6 months- Autumn and Spring).
- The date and agenda for these meetings should be discussed in advance with the Muintir na Tire Development Officer.
- These schemes could be better enhanced by fostering a stronger sense of community ownership at a District Level – this could take the form of a small committee or District Representatives (these would be members of Community Alert/Neighbourhood Watch).
- This committee could work with AGS locally to develop the Crime Prevention Plan which would be presented and approved at the District AGM in the Autumn.
- It would make sense that perhaps two representatives from each of these working groups would come together to meet with the Chief Superintendent twice a year to brief An Garda Síochána and agree on priorities for the year ahead.
- Accountability meetings should be held on matters of public concern. These would include, but not be limited to, the many issues arising in the Community Text Alert programme.
- The intelligence and security role of the Gardaí should be maintained, at least to some extent. The information gathered by members from interactions with the public is unique, and unlikely to be readily available to another agency.

Fear of Crime

A specific focus within An Garda Síochána on tackling the fear of crime is particularly important. The factors which contribute to this fear are complex and for example, cannot be solely analysed by looking at the statistics which are currently collected by An Garda Síochána.

Factors which contribute to this fear include isolation, personal and community health and wellbeing, the level of local community development activity, community pride, available Garda resources, communication between An Garda Síochána and the community, levels of socio economic and other disadvantage experienced locally, crime itself and specific types of crime in particular, media coverage and other forms of communication around the issue of crime.

Whilst many of these could not be the responsibility of a police force alone, the overall level of Fear of Crime is an issue which should be prioritized as part of policing strategy and planning. However it is clear that to have an impact on this requires a very strong partnership approach at a local and national level to effectively tackle this fear.

We suggest the following actions be taken:

- Engage in a process to measure the fear of crime and how it impacts on different groups within society.
- Collect specific data on crimes which have a particular impact on vulnerable sections of the population eg crimes affecting older people, aggravated burglary.
- As part of local Policing Plans incorporate meaningful measures to address the Fear of Crime in conjunction with local community alert/neighbourhood watch groups.
- Engage in partnership with other relevant agencies to target groups within society who are particularly vulnerable – this would include the Public Participation Networks, Age Friendly Forum, etc.

Furthermore supporting the development of community initiatives which actively develop community cohesion and contribute to social capital should be recognised as valuable measures by An Garda Síochána. This would reduce levels of social isolation in vulnerable groups and in communities as a whole. In this respect it is important that Gardaí working with communities be briefed on supports which are available to community groups to tackle these issues, and a forum for this briefing to take place is necessary.