

Submission on the Future of Policing

I am pleased to take this opportunity to make a submission on the Future of Policing. Our police force can and should play a vital role in upholding the rights of communities and individuals, in breaking down prejudice and barriers with marginal communities, and in ensuring that people regardless of background are treated with fairness and equality. However, there have been several high profile incidents and concerning trends in the operation of An Gardaí Síochána which have eroded the positive reputation of the Gardaí and damaged trust with the communities they aim to serve.

To address these, it is important that there is a clear vision for a transparent, accountable and rights-based police service which fulfils the core mandate of the police to maintain peace and uphold rights. Below are some of the areas which I believe are important to embed within the future of policing.

I would be very happy to engage with the Commission further as you develop your important work.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alice-Mary Higgins". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins

Gender Based Violence

Ratify International Conventions

The state needs to move forward on ratification of the Optional Protocol of UN Convention Against Torture and the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Resources will also need to be put in place to ensure that the standards set out in these conventions can be adhered to.

Improved Gender Based Violence Victims' Support Training

Training in working with victims of domestic violence and sexual violence should be compulsory for the Gardaí. Victims must be able to trust that they will be treated with respect and dignity in reporting a crime in order to tackle the low levels of reporting of gender-based violence and crime.

In 2017, the UN Committee Against Torture expressed concern that there was no specific training for public officials on dealing with victims of gender-based violence, including domestic and sexual violence and recommended that the state make such a training mandatory for police and other law enforcement officials dealing with such victims.

Improved Recording and Procedures GBV

The Garda Inspectorate Report has previously stated that gender based violence is one of the highest incident crime but the procedures for response and reporting are very inadequate. The system of reporting cases of domestic violence should be investigated and best practice standards identified and implemented nationally.

Community Policing

Community Policing is at the frontline of meaningful engagement with the communities and a key means of ensuring that everyone feels safe in their own communities, enabling them to be full participants in society. Community police forces are better positioned to identify emerging behaviour and crime trends in their communities and to work with other community actors to effectively prevent them. The community policing are particularly vital in marginalised or deprived communities in developing and sustaining positive relationships between the Garda Síochána and the communities.

There are very serious concerns in rural communities about the closure of many police stations. Combined with the closure of post offices and other community hubs, there is a risk of increased isolation of older people, particularly in terms of access to policing.

The overall proportion of community police within the force should be increased. Additionally, the community police require an increase in material and financial resourcing and supports in order to be fully effective. They must also have in place a suite of mechanisms for consultation and accountability to communities.

Support diversity and integration

The Gardaí Síochána should reflect the diversity of communities which they serve. In order to do this, steps should be taken to recruit and retain personnel from ethnic minority backgrounds. Recruitment from minorities must be proactive in order to overcome the social and cultural barriers that many individuals face. The Gardaí must also examine the cultural norms within their own profession to ensure that it is welcoming of cultural diversity.

The Garda Ethnic Liaison Officers have achieved excellent work in spite of very scarce resources. In a previous role I had the opportunity to work with a Garda Ethnic Liaison Officer and I saw at first hand the work of these officers within the police force. Too often an individual Gard has been expected to fulfil multiple demanding portfolios. Relationship between new communities and the Gardaí is an essential aspect of integration and this office is a key mechanism for supporting this relationship. The Garda Racial, Intercultural and Diversity Office should receive a significant increase of resources. As the ethnic minority communities in Ireland continue to grow and become concentrated in certain areas, this will be a key area of development for An Garda Síochána. As we think to the future of policing, it may also be important to think how liaison can be better managed between other marginal communities including people with disabilities or with mobility constraints.

It is important that the important work of community police and ethnic liaison officers are appropriately recognised in promotion within the Gardaí.

Resisting Use of Force

The Gardaí historically had a proud record as an unarmed police force. This has been eroded through the extension of permission of officers to carry firearms and the increased frequency of firearm and taser usage by officers and particularly in regard to armed response unit. The carrying of weapons and the use of force by officers should not be normalised as that would erode trust between communities and the police and could have a number of unintended consequences. The mission of An Garda Síochána to police with the confidence, trust and support of the people can be best achieved through the minimal threat or use of force.

Right to Unionisation

Rank and file Gardaí should have the right to unionise and claim bargaining rights. This is an essential reform to ensure fairness and accountability within the Gardaí ranks.

Data Protection

It is crucial that An Garda Síochána adhere to the highest possible standards of data protection, particularly in respect of the new General Data Protection Regulation which comes into force this year. It is very concerning that there have been a number of reports in the past of personal data being misused, mishandled and inappropriately shared. Breaches of data protection standards need to be taken very seriously.

Transparency and Accountability

A full independent review should be conducted of Garda disciplinary and prosecution procedures. Further procedures relating to the detention of older people and vulnerable people should be reviewed.

Complaints mechanisms ought to be well-resourced. The Garda Ombudsman decision making process should be communicated to complainants.