



POLICING WITH THE COMMUNITY 2009

Sinn Féin submission to the
Meath District Policing Plan 2009



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2009

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Contents

Section 1: Introduction

Section 2: National and Local Policing Plan's 2008

Section 3 Public Forums and Focus Groups

Section 4: Deployment and Resourcing priorities

Section 5: Serious Drug and Gun Crime

Section 6 Anti-social Behaviour and Public Order Offences

Section 7 Domestic and Sexual Violence

Section 8: Policing for Older people and other vulnerable groups

Section 9: Conclusion

1. Introduction

Sinn Féin welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Meath District Policing Plan 2009.

This process of consultation with political parties, commenced by An Garda Síochána last year, has been a very positive experience. Sinn Féin was pleased to conclude that the District Policing Plan 2008 was a marked improvement on plans for previous years and to note that some of the positive elements contained in our submission last year have been incorporated in the Garda Policing Plan 2008. We trust that this submission will be equally well received.

We want to see an all-Island police service established. And we hope that the Garda Policing Plan 2009 and all future policing plans and corporate strategies will work towards the establishment of an all-Ireland policing service.

In the interim, we want a policing service in this State that can attract widespread support from, and that are seen as an integral part of, the host community as a whole. We want effective policing with local democratic accountability, shaped as a community service and imbued with a human rights ethos.

Our submission aims to build-upon and add to the positive elements of the divisional and district plans of 2008. It also learns from a number of national developments in 2008 including the Morris and Hartnett reports and makes recommendations arising out of those. Our sound and realistic proposals are grounded in the views of the communities themselves gleaned through a year-long process of participative consultation with local communities throughout Meath.

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking all those who took part in our community safety survey and who attended consultative meetings held by the party.

We put a focus on serious drug and gun crime and on anti-social behaviour and public order offences. A new section makes proposals specific to older people, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities.

All of our proposals and recommendations are made in the context of tightened budgetary constraints. It is our belief that measures can be taken to deploy Gardaí more effectively and efficiently within current funding provisions.

Our submission points to the potential of a re-prioritisation of policing missions accompanied by the re-direction of resources to match those priorities. We discuss the overdependence on Garda overtime and the potential for new rostering arrangements to address this. And we again demonstrate the need for a process of civilianisation to be expedited to a level equivalent with our neighbouring jurisdictions in order to quickly and cost-effectively free up fully trained Gardaí.

2. National and Local Policing Plan's 2008

The introduction of policing plans and the decision to accept submissions to same is good practice and is a positive example of progress made by An Garda Síochána in recent years. That said it is important that the plans be subject to ongoing review and independent evaluation and we hope the Garda Ombudsman Commission, inspectorate and the proposed Meath Joint Policing Committee amongst others will play important roles in this regard.

From Sinn Féin's perspective the priorities determined by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform and contained in the Policing Plan 2008 are significantly better than those of previous years. We were pleased to find that many of the priorities determined greatly reflect the main points contained in Sinn Féin's national submission made during the development of that plan. To this end we submit this local plan in advance of the publication of the local district plan.

Positive examples relate to the areas of: Gun crime, organised crime and drugs, Joint Policing Committees, deployment, and crime prevention and reduction.

In relation to gun crime, organised crime and drugs a commitment was made to make greater use of the Criminal Assets Bureau to target those engaged at any level of drug dealing and to enhance the activities of drug units and the Gardaí to focus on places where drug dealing and use are likely.

In terms of Joint Policing Committees, a commitment was made for Gardaí to

participate fully in Joint Policing Committees and forge local partnerships to address issues.

The Community Safety Strategy adopted by the Waterford City J.P.C. is an example of such local partnership arrangements. The strategy is the first step towards developing a proper inter-agency response to crime and anti-social behaviour in Waterford. This strategy should strongly inform the drafting of the Local District Policing Plan for 2009.

As to deployment, last years National [sic] Plan pledges to increase the proportion of Gardaí on operational duty including through civilian support, develop a Garda Charter including target response times, and increase the level of high visibility patrols. Unfortunately in terms of the high visibility patrols commitment it only stipulates through the greater use of marked cars. Sinn Féin would advocate greater use of foot patrols and bicycles and our research in the community affirms this preference.

On the negative side the sole focus of the Public Order priority as determined by the Minister is punitive i.e ASBO's, behavioural warnings and on-the-spot fines. This is in contrast to the more balanced approach advocated by Sinn Féin which also emphasises the importance of prevention through risk identification and early supportive intervention and the effective potential of restorative justice responses.

Another negative is the lack of national guidelines for JPC's which resulted in the non implementation of the local policing fora and the establishment of a JPC in Meath

3. Policing Forums and Focus Groups

Sinn Féin believes it is essential that each policing plan strongly reflects the views and priorities of communities. In preparation for our local submission this year the party carried out a series of focus groups and consultations. The objective of this was to identify the particular behaviours that were causing serious problems and to determine some of the most effective responses from the perspective of local people. The findings of this research greatly inform the recommendations made therein.

In each setting the priority issues identified and proposed solutions suggested were familiar and typical. The priority issues identified included:

- Break-ins
- Older people living alone
- Traveller Feuding
- Family Feuding
- Drugs
- Anti-social behaviour such as vandalism, verbal abuse and stone throwing
- Noise such as dogs, house parties, cars and fireworks
- Joy-riding and boy/girl racing and old cars bought cheaply for the purpose
- Drunken behaviour
- Young people loitering
- Intimidation of older people and people with disabilities
- Problems associated with urban night entertainment such as drunk and disorderly conduct, on-street violence and the high volume of people on the streets.
- Car damage and theft
- Bicycle theft
- Attacks on young people by gangs
- Youth perspective on getting drunk as cool
- Drugs even cheaper than night out drinking
- Fears of making complaints against anti-social neighbours
- Perception of zero Garda follow up
- Slow Garda response times
- Garda failure to return phone-calls
- Difficulty in getting through to Garda Station
- Abuse of powers of arrest and mis-direction of Garda resources to suit statistical targets
- People giving up on reporting incidents to Gardaí due to perceived non-action
- Communities not familiar to local gardaí and insufficient numbers of community gaurds
- Community Gardaí often not available
- Difficulties attempting to establish community policing forums
- Positive plans agreed with the community are vulnerable to any change in Garda personnel
- Difficulties forming residents associations due to modern living styles and work pressures
- Need for garda response to compensate for the inability of local authorities to deal with anti-social behaviour on the part of owner-occupiers
- High volumes of private-rented property in some estates

Proposals expressly articulated by participants at our meeting and survey included:

- Senior Gardaí should report back to the community on a regular (three monthly) basis
- Constant Garda presence should be maintained through small on-the-beat patrols
- Increase the number of Gardaí on foot patrol
- Increase the number of community Gardaí
- Improve response times
- Develop a work practice to insulate plans agreed with the community from any adverse affects due to change in Garda personnel
- Improve the mechanism to record calls and monitor responses to issues raised
- Every complaint should be provided with an incident number to enable them to track Garda progress on their complaint and periodic meetings could be held between Resident's Associations and Gardaí to review these numbers
- Gardaí should pursue greater inter-agency co-operation in particular to enable early intervention by the health authorities with families at risk
- The huge drain on Garda resources urban night entertainment could be addressed through a collaborative forum with the Gardaí, Vintners, night-club owners and other stakeholders (as in Cork City)
- Identify levels and patterns of crime and develop and implement appropriate responses
- Put in place arrangements for Gardaí to inform private landlords of any anti-social behaviour on the part of tenants
- Encourage the reporting of boy/girl racer related offences
- Role out and promotion by Gardaí of Dial To Stop Drug Dealing in Meath
- Continue to work with resident associations and neighbourhood watch schemes to address issues that arise
- Encourage longer-term stationing of Gardaí, and profile community gardaí in local papers
- Ensure Gardaí are available to meet groups after normal working hours
- The hosting of clinics in communities by community Gardaí
- Increase direct positive engagement between Gardaí and pupils in schools

The issues identified as priorities by local communities and detailed above must be given due consideration and afforded appropriate priority in the 2009 Meath District Plan. The proposed Meath Joint Policing Committee should facilitate direct community input into the District and Divisional Plans for next year. In addition the operation of those plans should be evaluated and reviewed by the community via the JPC periodically throughout the year.

4. Deployment and resourcing priorities:

It is essential that all deployment and resourcing provisions detailed in the Divisional and District Policing Plans for Meath reflect and respond to the priorities identified and the proposals emanating from communities themselves as articulated by the forums and public meetings outlined in the previous section.

In addition 2009 commitments relating to the allocation of resources must be informed by the up-coming report of the Garda inspectorate once that is available. Relevant provisions within the 2009 plans should be reviewed and revised in light of that report should the publication of the policing plan precede it.

The focused efforts by Sinn Féin in Meath to consult the public directly, in relation to their safety, over the last year allow us make the following specific proposals in relation to deployment and resourcing on their behalf:

- The District Policing Plan 2009 should contain strong actions and performance indicators aimed at reversing poor public expectations of the Gardaí both through quicker routine response times and the communication to residents of follow-up actions undertaken
- The plan should prioritise participation by Garda members in public meetings hosted by the JPC, Community Policing Fora (when established) and others.
- It should also provide for the extensive roll-out of regular Garda clinics in the community
- A commitment from Gardaí to work with communities, local authorities and statutory agencies, such as the HSE, to develop and implement comprehensive crime prevention strategies at a local level.
- It is essential that the plan's actions and indicators prioritise those measures which have been deemed by communities to be most effective in terms of tackling crime and anti-social behaviour and in building community trust and confidence relative to others e.g. more Gardaí on foot patrol and bicycles and more Juvenile Liaison Officers.
- The key priority for 2009 must be to realise more Gardaí on foot and bicycle patrolling anti-social behaviour hotspots and residential areas with greater frequency and particularly during the hours when problematic and criminal behaviour occurs. And interacting positively with the community while they do so.
- The district plan for 2009 should provide for an evaluation of all operational spending with a view to achieving a greater match with established community priorities, this should be conducted in conjunction with the JPC.
- The 2009 Plan should expedite a further extended process of civilianisation of administrative tasks and of the Garda traffic corps thereby freeing up fully trained Gardaí to be redeployed into much needed patrolling duties and ultimately to fight crime.

- The 2009 Plan should also include a commitment on the part of the Gardaí to determine resourcing priorities, including the manner of deployment and shift arrangements, in partnership with communities via the JPC and local community policing for a (when established).

5. Serious drug and gun crime

As in previous years it is essential that the local policing plan includes actions with performance indicators relating specifically to targeting serious drug and gun crime and to the implementation of the National Drugs strategy and the plans of the local and regional drugs taskforces.

We appreciate that taking a justice approach alone to the drugs issue will be of little value and it is essential that the Government prioritise and resources prevention, treatment and rehabilitation alongside supply reduction.

The District Policing Plan 2009 should prioritise the following:

- Activities focused on disrupting illegal drug supply chains and on eliminating the proceeds of drug-related crime
- The continued pursuit of major drug traffickers and lower level dealers in addition. We need a more aggressive pursuit of major drug traffickers, ensuring that the bigger players are caught, tried and receive appropriate and consistent sentences.
- One factor contributing to the high number of offences committed while on bail is the length of time spent on bail awaiting the commencement of a trial. The District Plan for 2009 should contain targets and performance indicators aimed at ensuring that no unnecessary delays are arising from the Garda end of the investigation and prosecution process.
- The resources available to Local Garda Drug Unit should be at least doubled and at all times strive to operate at full capacity with dedicated personnel. Community input should be sought via the JPC and Community Policing Fora (when established) or like bodies such as the regional and local task forces.
- Increase Garda profile in areas experiencing chronic problems of public drug dealing and use through higher frequency of targeted patrols on foot and bicycles in particular.
- The number of sniffer dog and handler teams skilled in detection of drugs and firearms should be increased in order to undertake valuable demand and supply reduction work including but not limited to intelligence led operations
- Evidence suggests that cocaine and other drugs are now widely in use in public houses, nightclubs and music venues. In 2009 the Gardaí in Meath, through the appropriate forum, should endeavour to negotiate an arrangement with vintners, nightclub owners and security providers etc aimed at achieving permission for Garda sniffer dogs

to randomly enter and conduct searches of licensed premises. The cost of the operations to be jointly met by the statutory agencies and the vintners.

- Co-operation with the promised state-wide roll out of the ‘Dial to stop drug dealing’ initiative – a non Garda phone line for reporting drug related crime that was successfully piloted in Dublin.

6. Anti-social behaviour and public order offences

While ‘anti-social behaviour’ may have a variety of legal definitions, it is a popular blanket term commonly understood to cover a variety of different anti-community behaviours ranging from criminal behaviour (for example assaults, drug dealing, joy riding and vandalism) through to non-criminal and nuisance type behaviour (such as loitering, verbal abuse and excessive noise), we believe that it is crucial to distinguish between criminal and non-criminal activities. In the interests of safe communities and the effective resolution of community conflict, criminal behaviour must be properly policed and prosecuted and non-criminal behaviour must also be responded to accordingly.

We believe that it is crucial that there is a partnership approach between the Gardaí and Meath County Council. The Council must also prioritise prevention and intervention in order to help reduce complaints and ensure that it does not pursue a solely punitive approach.

Actions and performance indicators in the 2009 plan should include the following:

- A commitment to increase the rates of enforcement and prosecution of public order offences, drug and alcohol related crimes, joy riding/boy racing type offences, criminal vandalism, provisions relating to dangerous dogs and noise pollution.
- A commitment to co-operate and encourage the use of community restorative justice (CRJ) initiatives, to train Gardaí in the principles of CRJ and mediation and to ring fence part of the Garda budget for same.
- Development by the Gardaí of local youth strategies aimed at advancing appropriate Garda services for children and young people. This must include greater supervision, and mentoring where possible, of high risk offenders.
- A commitment to increase the number of community gardaí employed full-time operating in communities and the ring-fencing of such resources.
- A commitment to instigate and maintain regular ‘walkabouts’ along with the council, community groups and elected representatives and to maintain regular contact with same.
- Gardaí should work with others, through an appropriate forum; to tackle rising levels of alcohol related public order offences in the city’s entertainment zone.
- Arrange for the effectiveness evaluation of existing CCTV

- schemes in the community in terms of crime prevention, reduction, investigation and suitability as evidence in court. Work with local authorities to ensure that all CCTV schemes are objective-driven, fit for purpose technically and in terms of lighting and monitoring.
- A commitment to act on the recommendations of the joint policing committee and local policing fora (yet to be rolled out)

7. Domestic and Sexual Violence

The prevalence and gravity of crimes of domestic and sexual violence is often not recognised. This is despite the fact that:

- An estimated 1 in 5 Irish women experience domestic violence at some point in their lives
- Of 126 women violently killed in 2006, 81 were killed in their home and just under 50% of victims whose cases have concluded were killed by their partners or ex partner.
- In 2003 on average more than 23 incidents of domestic violence were recorded each day compared with an average of 11 for other assault categories.

It is absolutely essential that domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse crimes are named as crime priorities in this years plan. The plan should also include actions and performance indicators including:

- A commitment to prioritise the prosecution of domestic violence crimes on indictment where possible rather than simply as breaches of orders.
- Existing Garda policy on domestic violence and practice must become subject to monitoring, support and supervision to ensure it at least achieves the level of response expected and as set down in policy.
- Greater investment to be made in specialised training and on-going in-house training for Gardaí given the distinct nature of crimes of domestic and sexual violence.
- Support the introduction of a dedicated sexual violence officer to provide the immediate response and to be a single point of contact throughout the criminal justice system.
- Recognition that, and equal treatment of, men suffering from domestic violence.

8. Policing for Older People and Other Vulnerable Groups

Older people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups are often disproportionately affected by societal problems and as a consequence have particular policing needs.

An increasing number of older people are living in isolation, loneliness and fear. This was apparent in the findings of our community safety survey where some older people, although having never been a victim of crime, had a real fear of becoming one. While society must respond comprehensively and holistically to the situation of older people living in isolation, An Garda Síochána must also increase its efforts to address the fear factor.

The District Policing Plan for 2009 should contain provisions for Gardaí to enhance and step up their links with groups representing older people nationally and locally. Special efforts should be made by Gardaí to assist with the establishment and running of residents associations in areas where the population is predominantly elderly.

People with disabilities also have particular policing needs. Gardaí should work with the disability sector to establish what those needs are and to develop actions and plans for delivery. One such need relates to emergency services for deaf people.

The 2009 District Plan should contain a timeframe within which greater emergency access for deaf and hard of

hearing people to An Garda Síochána will be facilitated including through the introduction of a dedicated text messaging service for instances of emergency.

In an increasingly diverse society it is important to note and respond to the experience of ethnic minorities. The Gardaí's own annual public attitude survey usually documents some of these experiences. The 2007 survey found that crime victimisation rates of migrants and refugees are almost double that of the general population. When compared to the general population, a disproportionately lower percentage of ethnic minorities expressed satisfaction with Garda responses and with being kept informed by Gardaí of progress.

The district plan should commit Gardaí to work with local integration forums and refugee/asylum seeker support groups.

9. Conclusion:

I welcome the consultative approach adopted by the Gardaí in Meath in formulating its divisional and district policing plans. It is crucial that people in the community have their say. The many recommendations contained within this submission are gleaned through years of local elected representation across Meath and working with the community. We believe our proposals are positive, realisable and deliverable.