



AN TÚDARÁS PÓILÍNEACHTA  
POLICING AUTHORITY

**A public conversation on  
Community Safety Oversight — what should it mean  
in an Irish policing context?**

*Summary Notes from Event held on 25 July 2019*

## 1 Introduction and Key Themes

On 25 July 2019, the Policing Authority held a public conversation on community safety oversight, with a specific focus on its meaning in the Irish policing context. Over 80 people attended this event, including representatives from civil society organisations, local authorities, academia, the Garda Síochána, and government agencies and departments.

The Chairperson of the Policing Authority, Josephine Feehily, opened the event by outlining the context and describing the twofold rationale for holding the event. Firstly, one element of the Government Decision on Policing Reform in December 2018 is to establish a Policing and Community Safety Oversight Commission (PCSOC). The Department of Justice and Equality intend that the Policing Authority and the Garda Inspectorate will form the basis of this newly proposed oversight organisation. With this in mind, and to be prepared for its future role, the Authority decided that it should deepen its understanding of community safety in general, and community safety oversight in particular. Secondly, part of the Authority's functions is to advise the Minister for Justice and Equality on policing matters and as such, it was considered appropriate that it advises in relation to proposed legislation on community safety oversight. To do this, the Authority decided to gain an understanding of the meaning of the term community safety and what oversight in this context should mean.

On the morning of the event, the Irish Times published an opinion editorial by the Chairperson which gives a more detailed account of this rationale, the text of which is included in Appendix 1. The full video of the event is [available on the Policing Authority website](#).

The event was independently moderated by Ms. Clare Duignan and four key speakers presented on different aspects of what community safety oversight might mean. The biographies of these speakers, set out in section 2 of this paper, demonstrate the extensive knowledge of policing and community safety from practical, academic and oversight perspectives that these presenters brought to the discussion. The presentations were followed by a panel discussion, which also included the Chairperson of the Policing Authority and Ms. Oonagh McPhillips, Deputy Secretary General at the Department of Justice and Equality. Lastly, there was a robust questions and answers session which was open to the floor.

Key themes and questions arising from the event included the following:

1. Introducing the concept of community safety into the Irish landscape represents a significant change with great potential, if implemented correctly.
2. An important element of delivering community safety is the participation and collaboration of all relevant agencies, since effective policing and community safety are not just the responsibility of the Garda Síochána, but of a range of agencies.
3. In order for the new proposed policing and community safety oversight body to be successful, it must have a clear role definition, proper sources of funding, and the authority to hold other agencies to account.
4. A key condition for successful engagement with local communities and placing community policing to the forefront is cultural change. This change must occur within the Garda Síochána in an organisational context, but also in a shift towards a public health oriented approach to policing, rather than the criminal justice approach.

A full list of themes raised at the event is available in section 5 of this paper.

## **2 Brief Description of the Speakers**

### **Dr. Johnny Connolly — Member of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland**

Dr. Johnny Connolly is a Research Fellow with the Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice project, based in UL School of Law. He is involved in a new executive programme funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs which seeks to improve the use of evidence by professionals working with children. Johnny is also involved in developing a new Masters programme, 'Using Evidence to Improve Societal Outcomes in the Real World'. He lectures on the Policing and Criminal Justice online Masters Programme, a collaboration between UL and the Garda Training College. Previously, he was an Irish Research Council/ICCL Research Fellow. As part of the National Drugs Strategy, he is involved in developing a Community Crime Impact Assessment as a way of measuring and monitoring community safety needs and interventions. In 2017, he was appointed by the Minister for Justice as a member of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland.

### **Ms. Susannah Hancock — Chief Executive, Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, UK**

Ms. Hancock started her career as a Probation Officer in London, before moving on to managing multiagency Youth Offending Teams in a number of south London boroughs. She joined the Youth Justice Board, initially as its Head of London and then as National Head of Performance, working across England and Wales to deliver on a national programme to reduce youth reoffending and prevent young people offending. She went on to work for the London Criminal Justice Board as its Director of Reducing Reoffending, leading a cross agency team to deliver a programme of criminal justice reform across London. Susannah's roles prior to joining the APCC included Assistant Chief Executive of the national charity Victim Support, and most recently, Chief Executive for the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner in Essex.

### **Ms. Rita Fagan — Director, Family Resource Centre, St Michael's Estate, Inchicore, Dublin 8**

Ms. Fagan is from a working class family in the Liberties, Dublin and has lived there all her life where she volunteers around tenants' issues. She began work in a sewing factory at the age of 14 and spent the next 14 years working there and also becoming actively involved in the trade union movement. Rita has a huge passion for social justice and equality issues and has worked tirelessly to bring communities together, enabling them to take action and become empowered. Rita worked for 11 years as a volunteer and one year fulltime with the Dublin Simon Community. From here she was sponsored by the Bishop of Dublin and others to partake in the Community & Youth Work course in NUI Maynooth. On a placement from this course, Rita came to St. Michael's Estate where today she continues her work for social change at this grassroots community. In doing this, Rita has been director of the Family Resource Centre, Community Development Project for the past 30 years.

### **Professor Duncan Morrow — Professor in Politics and Director of Community Engagement, Ulster University**

Professor Duncan Morrow has a long history in research and practical engagement in peace and conflict studies, and in questions of politics, ethnic conflict, religion and politics and peacebuilding including a strong interest in policing and criminal justice. Between 2002 and 2012, he was Chief Executive of the NI Community Relations Council. In 1998 he was appointed as a Sentence Review Commissioner responsible for implementing the early release provisions of the Good Friday Agreement. Duncan worked intensively with police leadership during the period of transition from RUC to PSNI after the Agreement and has taken a continuous interest in many aspects of practice

and policy including Diversity issues, Policing with the Community, Public Order Issues and Neighbourhood Policing. He has been part of the Ulster University Police Recruit Training Group since 2012. Between 2012 and 2015 he was chair of the Independent Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism which advised the Scottish Government. In 2015-2016 he chaired the Independent Advisory Group on Hate Crime, Prejudice and Community Cohesion.

### 3 Table 1: Highlights from Speakers' Presentations

<b>Dr. Johnny Connolly: “Community Safety Oversight – of what and of whom?”</b>
Based on the consultation conducted by the Commission on the Future of Policing (CFP), the area that revealed the highest levels of uncertainty amongst the public and the Gardaí was lack of clarity around the precise role of the Garda Síochána.
The consultation revealed the existing consensus that community policing must be central in any future vision of policing in Ireland. It was revealed that members of the Garda Síochána think of themselves as community police.
In Ireland, as in many other jurisdictions, community policing is marginalised and under-valued. There is a need for agreed strategy on community policing. The CFP envisions a police force that puts community policing at its core. The successful delivery of this requires: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A fundamental change to the Garda Síochána as an organisation, both structurally and culturally.</li> <li>2. Acknowledgment that effective policing and community safety is not just the responsibility of the police, but of other agencies and organisations as well, which need to work in a supporting and cooperating manner.</li> </ol> <p>The central role of PCSOC will be in articulating and communicating this vision and then facilitating and supporting its delivery in a community based and interagency-led manner.</p>
The CFP regards district policing as the backbone of police work and mission. In the CFP’s envisioned model, all police personnel at a district level should be considered community police. As such, they should develop their own district policing plan, consult with local community fora and to be equipped to deliver all routine policing services, with support provided by the divisional level. It requires devolution of power and the decentralisation of police officers’ authority to the front line, so that Headquarters would set policies, standards etc. and front line police units would decide how they can best deliver those objectives and be accountable to the outcomes.
Research shows that 80% of police time is occupied with non-crime issues. The CFP heard during the consultation process that Gardaí are spending a lot of their time on engaging in non-crime duties, which could have been dealt with by other agencies. The CFP made recommendations to address some of these issues, such as: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Enabling more Gardaí to be deployed at the front line by removing non-core duties or delegating jobs that don’t require Garda power to Garda staff or outsource them.</li> <li>2. Calling other agencies to step up to the mark and do things that they should be doing instead of the Garda Síochána.</li> </ol> <p>Setting up intervention teams to be based at divisional level and available around the clock.</p>
Community policing is about front line police knowing their community well, being visible,

**Dr. Johnny Connolly: “Community Safety Oversight – of what and of whom?”**

engaging with the communities and developing partnerships to solve problems and achieve community safety It requires partnerships between the police, the community and other relevant agencies.

Community policing and community safety involves community empowerment.

A public health oriented approach to policing is about proactive preventative activities of working with partners to solve problems and achieve shared outcomes.

Effective forums are important to enable police to engage with local communities. The consultation revealed that JPCs in the current model are not effective enough. Most of them had no meaningful impact on reducing crime.

It is here where PCSOC will have a very important role. The key objective would be to build community trust and address problems through authentic engagement. It should also work with local fora to promote community safety at a local level and it should have funding available to support local innovation and initiatives. Supporting JPCs and local policing fora to work with police and other agencies to set objectives priorities and plans.

Policing is about human rights for citizens. PCSOC should be a way of delivering human rights at a local level.

**Ms. Susannah Hancock – “Community Safety Oversight – The UK experience and some pitfalls and lessons learned that Ireland could consider?”**

Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) are UK statutory bodies established under the Crime and Disorder Act, 1998. The members of CSPs are local authorities, police, and clinical commissioning groups (which consist of the health commissioning bodies, fire and rescue authorities and the probation service). The role of CSPs is to do everything which is reasonably possible to prevent anti-social behaviour, substance misuse and reoffending.

When established in 1998, the CSPs were well funded and therefore were powerful bodies. Now, CSPs are much smaller with most of them funded by the Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs).

CSPs have a legal obligation to share their Community Safety Partnership Plans with PCCs. Additionally, CSPs must have regard to the *Policing Commissioner’s Police and Crime Plan*. PCCs have a statutory responsibility to monitor the performance of CSPs.

The oversight responsibility of PCCs in England and Wales, whilst being relatively limited, is one which PCCs are eager to clarify. The CSP legislation was produced before the legislation which set up the PCCs. Thus, there is a need to clarify accountability and responsibilities in order for partnerships to be held to account. Government in England and Wales are now seeking to make this role clearer.

The performance of CSPs is very mixed as a result of patchy resourcing, changes which have occurred since 1998 and a lack of clarity surrounding who is responsible for CSPs as statutory bodies which are not directly subject to inspection. PCCs are keen to address this lack of clarity regarding oversight of CSPs in order to tackle issues which require a co-ordinated response such as serious violence and human-trafficking.

**Ms. Susannah Hancock – “Community Safety Oversight – The UK experience and some pitfalls and lessons learned that Ireland could consider?”**

Currently in the UK there is a potential for a piece of legislation that will give CSPs a statutory duty to prevent serious violence. This is a real opportunity and challenge to bring the relevant partners together to address these issues.

England and Wales are seeking greater statutory powers for PCCs and CSPs. In Scotland, significant progress has been made in tackling the issue of serious violence through their equivalent CSPs without statutory levers — Scotland’s CSPs are not statutory bodies but rather focus on bringing partners around the table to tackle common challenges. This shows that when wanting to make a difference at a local level, it is ultimately about relationships and partnerships working well together, whether or not there are statutory powers at play or whether or not one group is accountable to somebody else. Ultimately the relationships on the ground are the keys to success. At a strategic and operational level, commitment to a common endeavour is required of all partner agencies to tackle community safety issues.

**Ms. Rita Fagan – “What does the community want, and indeed not want, from Community Safety Oversight”**

Working class communities in North and South inner-city Dublin live in fear as a result of current feuds, gangland crime, child grooming and face many challenges, including gentrification. Those people are afraid to speak up and report crimes to the Garda Síochána. People in these communities feel that the Gardaí are never there for them.

Many communities in Ireland are still not getting all that they should be getting in terms of community safety and policing. Due to austerity, many community projects were cancelled and there are less community Gardaí today compared to the past. The community paid a price for it.

Community issues need to be addressed through many actors working together.

The new oversight body — PCSOC — should take a multi-agency approach, so that not only the police will be involved in community safety, but also estate managements, Túsla, education and the community. PCSOC must have real oversight of these agencies and their work.

If the funds aren’t in place and the people who have the authority to make decisions/commitments are not at the table, it won’t work.

Community policing must be valued. People want to see the police in their communities. The most important Gardaí are the ones on the ground.

It is essential to invest in prevention work by doing research in the sense of using the knowledge of the workers on the ground, and allocating funds.

It is important that Gardaí receive training, specifically around class and poverty, that they understand the authority and community trust held by community workers and become the voice for community issues.

**Professor Duncan Morrow – “The Northern Ireland experience, and whether there a conflict of interest between helping/developing communities and overseeing Community Safety”**

**Ms. Rita Fagan – “What does the community want, and indeed not want, from Community Safety Oversight”**

Northern Ireland has a unique context with regards to policing, including questions over the legitimacy of the police. The main problems relating to policing in Northern Ireland are:

1. We inherited a broad legitimacy crisis. How do we get people to buy into community policing?
2. Security was the bottom line priority for the police. Policing became a system which operated internally rather than publicly. For security purposes people could only live in certain areas so police contact with communities was limited and the way they discussed security was limited.

Statistics show that 80% of police time is not spent on crime, but on the problems people raise and the response to that. Research tells us that more police is not necessarily the answer. Rather, what is needed is the ability to identify the issues and concentrate greater resources on that location and have a lot of different responses to those issues. Most issues require more agencies than the police alone to solve a problem.

The achievement of successful policing requires thinking about the bigger picture. Police belong to the community and this relationship needs to be monitored.

It is important not to just be responding to problems, but trying to find long term solutions in the community in an inter-agency capacity. This is referred to as policing with the community.

Policing with the community requires a culture change, and learning that policing with the community means that we are doing this together. However, culture doesn't just happen, it has to be fostered inside the policing organisation.

The big picture is not necessarily a different and new structure. It is the culture of the organisation, its outcome and ways of measuring its success (whether changes are working for people on the ground). Just as issues are identified and addressed locally, they must also be held to account locally.

Local policing is the first to suffer under a policy of austerity. Typically, local police services are reduced in those situations meaning that there are no mechanisms for the police to understand the real issues at play. As a result, the police only focus on emergencies.

Police and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs):

- One in every local government area;
- Made up of three different members: An elected member, a recruited member from the area who is supposed to be broadly representative of that community, and a designated statutory partner;
- Recent research suggests that this system has caused more people to be more engaged and to understand the complexity of policing. This system has a more local focus so that people have been able to understand that different communities have different needs;
- Problematic issues in the PCSPs include accountability (for example, turnover of staff, poor attendance, councillors running the meetings in a bad manner). PCSP structure is seen as bureaucratic and distant. It is seen as part of a community structure but one which does not necessarily take enough action within the community. Issues about the lesson sharing which would allow people to share their knowledge (this requires greater investment and structured lesson sharing); and

**Ms. Rita Fagan – “What does the community want, and indeed not want, from Community Safety Oversight”**

- The importance of clarity of roles — the work that Professor Morrow and colleagues did with PCSPs and policing committees identified that there is a real wish to understand what are we for, how do we do it and what do we all have to bring the people. This includes performance oversight and learning.

There is a need for a change in the PCSPs and in policing culture. PCSPs need to ask themselves “are we solving the problems people are bringing to us?”, “are we capable of identifying the problems in the community?”, “is there evidence that these problems exist and how do we hold ourselves to account for the delivery of solutions?”. PCSPs need to know that they are responsible and accountable for the development of this culture.

**4 Table 2: Panel Discussion**

**Panel Discussion Highlights**

**The first question** was addressed to Ms. McPhillips. The discussion moderator stated that based on all the presentations, it is becoming evident that the most crucial thing to deliver effective community safety and community safety oversight, are around the “soft skills”, such as culture, relationships, listening and participant’s commitment to “be in the room”. Thus, the question was whether or not it is possible to legislate for these type of skills and to structure an oversight body that will be able to capture, monitor and review those softer attributes.

Ms. McPhillips response included the following points:

1. In the drafting process, the Department are taking a minimal approach, focusing only on what absolutely needs to be in the legislation and keeping it as neat as possible.
2. Focus on funding — how to resource working together and partnerships. Funding the PCSOC to be able to “oil” the existing partnerships on the ground.
3. The legislation will have to relate to the role of the PCSOC in promoting as well as scrutinising community safety.

**The second question** was addressed to Dr. Johnny Connolly. The discussion moderator asked why the CFP thought that the current policing structure will not be able to absorb the proposed greater emphasis on community safety, leading them to recommend a change.

Dr. Connolly explained that the CFP noticed the lack of coherence in the relationship between the JPCs and the localised structures. There is a huge gap. Thus, something transformative was required. There was a need for a new structure that will focus on problem solving.

Ms. McPhillips added that broadening the definition of what policing is in Ireland is at the core of the CFP’s report, but there is a lot of work to be done to define what it is.

**The third question** was addressed to Ms. Hancock, and was about the announcement by the Prime Minister of the UK, that there will be an addition of 20,000 police officers in the next 3



## Panel Discussion Highlights

years. The question was whether or not local PCCs can use the funds for a crime initiative, such as knife crime for example, or must they use it for the new manpower? In addition, can national politics get in the way of that?

Ms Hancock referred to a few topics in her reply:

1. More police on the ground is not enough to deal with rising levels of crime. Community safety endeavour is the answer. Policing, as in police officers on the ground, is an important part of this, but it is only a part of it and not the whole thing.
2. PCCs will probably realize that the way they mobilise on the ground the extra funds will be different from place to place and that the local response is absolutely the key to the PCCs model.
3. Public health approach to tackling crime and a focus on prevention

The benefit of the locally devolved model which we have through local PCCs is that we are responsible for how that money is spent and are directly accountable to the public. Quite rightly there will be some demands on the budget from the Home Secretary, but equally there will be demands from the public.

**The fourth question** was addressed to Ms. Fagan, following her comments about the drugs problem in disadvantaged communities and the need for a holistic response, which responds to the needs of the drug users, but also supports the families and the community. Thus, Ms. Fagan was asked what particular power the PCSOC should have with respect to it. Ms. Fagan replied that the new oversight body must have the powers to call all different bodies and agencies to account.

**The fifth question** was addressed to Professor Morrow, and was about the ways in which the new oversight agency can get accountability from the various agencies which are going to be involved in delivering community safety, in making people feeling safe and being safe.

Professor Morrow's response included:

1. The way to get accountability is by holding professional bodies to appropriate standards and making sure they are using their resources properly and delivering according to what they said.
2. Responsibility sharing — stepping away from the blaming culture, being able to say out loud that we have tried an approach but it didn't work.

**The sixth and last question** was addressed to the Chairperson, enquiring whether or not she had gained any greater understanding now regarding the ways in which the new oversight body will measure, hold to account and oversee community safety.

The Chairperson replied that although she doesn't hold a greater understanding of it at the moment, it looks like PCSOC's role will be to oversee the partnerships, and not the Garda Síochána, as the Authority currently does. In addition, the Chairperson stressed the importance of clarity in defining the new body's role, to avoid it being requested or expected to do things not in its capacity. It is also important to clarify who is responsible for delivering community safety, since without an answer to it we will not be able to define the role of the body in charge of overseeing the delivery of community safety.

## 5 Key Themes

The presentations of the four speakers, the panel discussion and the comments from the audience raised several common themes, which are set out in Table 3 below.

Table 3 - Key Themes	
Topic	Examples of Issues Raised
<b>Accountability</b>	Who is responsible for what? Who can hold all agencies working together to account? Is there accountability top to bottom?
<b>Importance of partnerships and inter-agency collaboration</b>	Police alone can't solve everything nor can they be blamed for not delivering solutions, since most issues require more agencies than the police alone to solve a problem.
	Similarly, the criminal justice system can't be the sole respondent and there is a need to create partnerships between the police, other agencies and the communities.
<b>Cultural change</b>	In order to put community policing in the front and engage with local communities, there is a need for a cultural change in the organisation.
<b>Public health oriented approach to policing</b>	Rooted in this term is the importance of proactive preventative activities with partners in local levels, meaning, shifting the dial from constant responding to demand and emergencies, to prevention through working with the community.
<b>Disadvantaged communities</b>	Low levels of reporting crime amongst disadvantaged communities, due to fear from local gangs.
	Some disadvantaged communities feel that they can't trust the police, that the police don't understand them and their issues.
	It is important to work with these communities, create local community projects and build the trust between them and the police.
<b>Police visibility</b>	While some speakers and members of the audience said that visibility of Gardaí makes a difference in terms of deterring crime, other speakers stressed that more police is not the answer and there is a need to identify the issues and concentrate greater resources on that location and have a lot of different responses to those issues.
<b>Police time occupied on non-crime issues</b>	According to research, 80% of police time is occupied with non-crime issues and duties (e.g. social problems)
	This applies to Gardaí as well – they engage in duties that could have been fulfilled by other agencies.
	It is important to get other relevant agencies involved and set up local initiatives, to free up Gardaí to be deployed at the front-line.
<b>What will the new oversight body need?</b>	A multi-agency approach.
	A stage of learning and reviewing.
	Authority — the ability to hold other agencies to account.

Table 3 - Key Themes	
	Clarity — the new oversight body must have a clear role definition, as well as clear ways to measure its performance and success. This clarity is essential in order to meet expectations.
	Proper funding

## 6 Brief Analysis of the Feedback Sheets of Participants

Participants at this event were offered the opportunity to fill in a feedback form, which included three questions:

1. Which organisations do you believe need to be involved in an Irish Community Safety model?
2. What are the basic principles that you believe should underpin a community Safety Oversight structure?
3. Are there any other comments you would like to make on today's topics?

Seventeen participants filled in the feedback forms and while this is a relatively low number, it is still possible to identify some general views, especially concerning the first question.

Responses to the first question identify four categories of organisations that participants view as needed to be involved in an Irish Community Safety model. These organisations are the Garda Síochána, Tusla, the HSE and Public Participation Networks. In addition, participants referred to the involvement of elected representatives in Community Forums as unnecessary.

Responses to the second question reveal that accountability is seen as the main principle that should underpin a community safety oversight model. This topic, as mentioned previously, was raised a couple of times during the presentations and panel discussion as an essential element of oversight. Analysis of the responses to this question reveals that the perception is that accountability ought to be shared among actors and not rest solely on the Gardaí. It was also mentioned that measuring and recording outcomes must be a part of this accountability. These two comments were also mentioned during the presentations and panel discussion.

Other principles that were mentioned frequently were the importance of partnership and collaboration, adequate funding, training, authority and reliance on community development principles. Not surprisingly, all those principles were also identified by the speakers during their presentations as essential features of the new oversight body.

Lastly, responses to the third question were largely positive, noting that the discussion was valuable, important and that the panel participants were excellent and offered interesting insights into different models of policing.

## **Appendix 1 – Opinion Editorial by Josephine Feehily, Chairperson of Policing Authority**

“We need to decide what we want Community Safety to do”

Inherent in Community Safety is the notion that problem-solving cannot be delivered by working in isolation.

Since its establishment in January 2016, the Policing Authority has been in the business of overseeing the performance of the Garda Síochána and the service it provides to the public. That service is complex, but it is directed towards a simple outcome. As set out in the Garda Síochána’s recent statement of strategy, the desired outcome is keeping people safe.

There is a general recognition that the role of the police has changed over time as society has evolved. Policing has increasingly become more than law enforcement. It is often about being a port of call for people when they are in crisis or in fear.

The roles that Garda members and Garda staff are called on to fulfil in those moments of crisis can involve dealing with mental health issues, accommodation, addiction, children and families in crisis and the complex interplay of all of these issues within a community. Often the solutions are not within the capacity of the Garda Síochána alone to provide.

In September 2018, the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing (CFP) was published. It set out a number of principles to guide the future of policing in Ireland, including that “policing is not the responsibility of the police alone, but involves other agencies of government, such as health and social services, and other sectors of society”.

The report introduces the concept of Community Safety, and recommended the establishment of a new Policing and Community Safety Oversight Commission. The Minister for Justice and Equality has designated the Policing Authority and the Garda Inspectorate as the foundation of the new body, which is recommended to have a core function to promote interagency working and scrutinise the role of all agencies as they affect policing and community safety.

Community Safety as a concept is an inarguable good –we want ourselves and members of our community to feel safe and be safe. But as a term it is not necessarily simple to define. Inherent in the concept are notions of collaboration and problem-solving that require the various services within the State to recognise that keeping a community safe at a collective or individual level cannot be delivered by working in isolation – nor is it the responsibility of one service.

### *Many years*

But it is not new. Many agencies and community groups and the Garda Síochána have been working within a Community Safety context for many years, albeit they may not have put that title on the work they do. This work has happened in some cases in a formalised, structured manner, but also in organic, quiet and informal ways as the various actors in a community come together to solve problems.

The Government has accepted the recommendations of the CFP and preparations for the necessary legislation are under way. It intends to put Community Safety on a statutory footing, and will establish the new body that will oversee Community Safety.

The Policing Authority is preparing now for this future oversight role, and key to that preparation is understanding how oversight can bring value to that Community Safety work.

At its most fundamental there is the question of oversight of what and of whom? The many agencies, departments and services –health, local authorities, child and other social services – already have their own accountability and oversight mechanisms. There is much to tease out in terms of how a new oversight body might oblige this broad church of actors to work together, but also to conceive of, oversee and report on their collective performance in delivering Community Safety.

How might contestability for budget and for ownership be managed when the community's fear of crime requires a public lighting rather than a law enforcement response? And how might this be achieved without weakening independent oversight of the Garda Síochána?

### *Oversight*

A crucial question is how will oversight deliver for the community? What value will it bring, and how best could it support the effective work that is already being done? How might it avoid getting in the way of that work?

The Policing Authority is conscious of the well-established, strong community development practice and ethos that exists in Ireland. It is aware of the tension that invariably can exist between a participative, bottom up, responsive way of working and the demands of formal structures and processes of accountability that can characterise by necessity the working of official Ireland.

Community Safety oversight is not something to be “done” to the community – it needs to bring value. The nature of the role envisaged for the oversight body also needs to be considered. Is there a tension or conflict when oversight is combined with a funding or facilitative role?

As this new legislation is being prepared, now is the time for these questions to be considered. It is fortunate that we are in some ways second adopters. There are many other jurisdictions that have formalised structures and processes around Community Safety oversight and from which Ireland can learn. It seems that there is, as of yet, no widely accepted model of best practice for Community Safety, no clear structure that might be easily adopted in Ireland, nor is there a settled, comprehensive oversight architecture from which we might take guidance and learnings.

*This opinion editorial by Josephine Feehily appeared in the Irish Times on 25 July 2019.*