

Policing Authority meeting in public 13 June 2016

Opening Statement by Garda Commissioner Nóirín O'Sullivan

Chairperson, Members of the Authority,

I want to thank you, first of all, for agreeing to our request to meet with you in public.

Answering your questions in public about how we're going to solve the problems raised in the O'Higgins Report is important. People need to see more than the usual formal reaction on paper. I welcome the chance to elaborate on the pivotal work that's going on and which we discussed in our recent private meeting.

I would also like to thank the Authority members for their stated recognition at our last meeting of our commitment to reform and the improvements we've already made in support for victims, protected disclosures and culture. When we published our Modernisation and Renewal Programme last week - and, Chair, thank you for being present for its launch -- it was a first step towards a new openness and accountability on our part.

The O'Higgins Report deals with a period 2007 – 2008 in a particular Garda District. The report highlights failures by An Garda Síochána and inescapable lessons that must and will be learned.

The report makes significant findings and recommendations in relation to critically important areas. It is clear that we failed victims of crime and they did not get the service they were entitled to from An Garda Síochána. That was unacceptable and I would like to take this opportunity to once again apologise to those victims.

But apology is only the beginning. We're now listening to and working with victims, seeing how we can make the situation better for them, and learn from what they tell us.

The O'Higgins Report raises questions about how Garda members who make protected disclosures are treated. I'm sorry to repeat myself, but I have consistently said that dissent is not disloyalty and speaking up is important. Those who bring forward complaints or issues may not always be right. That's not the point. They must be heard and their concerns carefully examined. Matters raised by whistleblowers have improved An Garda Síochána and I thank them for that.

Our Protected Disclosures Policy was published this morning and an email has been sent to each Garda and civilian member informing them of the Policy.

In addition, I have appointed a Protected Disclosure Manager who will be supported with a dedicated properly trained team, and we're working with Transparency International Ireland and other external providers to create an environment to ensure whistleblowers are protected and supported An Garda Síochána. When that work is finalised, we will present it to the Policing Authority.

In terms of victims of crime, it is not just victims identified in the O'Higgins Report that haven't been well served by us. Yes, many victims of crime have said they received a good service from us. But many others said we hadn't listened to them or kept them up-to-date on their case or the supports available to them.

In particular, victims of domestic violence felt we often failed to take their complaints seriously.

That was not good enough.

An Garda Síochána prioritised our commitment to putting victims of crime at the heart of the Garda service and a series of measures have been put in place over the last year to do just that.

28 dedicated Victim Service Offices were established last year across the country to ensure victims are kept informed as their cases progress through the justice system. They are staffed by specially trained Garda and civilian members working to a standard operating procedure.

Feedback from victims to the Victim Service Offices has been generally positive. However, our Public Attitude Survey, which will be published this week, has found that many victims are still not getting the level of information they expect. We will shortly be conducting focus groups with some of those victims of crime to examine how we can address this. In addition, in July we will start to conduct an evaluation of the performance of the Victim Service Offices to measure their impact and the lessons learnt from this will be applied.

We will also continue our regular consultations with victim groups through our Victims Forum to make sure we are constantly improving.

A point worth making here is that this is work in progress. Victims' needs change and so should the service provided to them - so we need, in effect, to keep asking victims "How are we doing?" and use that feedback to improve our service to them.

This demonstrates our overall approach to solving problems – we listen and learn, improve and measure, and, then if needed, strengthen further and measure again.

To ensure crimes against vulnerable victims are fully investigated and those victims are fully supported, the Garda Protective Service Bureau was set-up last year. This specialist unit is dedicated to making sure each and every complaint relating to child protection, human trafficking, and domestic and sexual violence is thoroughly and sensitively investigated. To ensure a consistent approach to such investigations across the country, Protective Service Units will be set-up in each of our regions. This will begin in the coming months.

To protect victims of domestic abuse we are developing a three-stage Risk Management Process that examines the risks to each victim and their family and what multi-agency supports are needed to reduce these risks. This process is based on research with the PSNI, Swedish Police and NYPD.

Other measures under our Modernisation and Renewal Programme will improve the service we provide to victims. A new call management system will grade calls based on their priority and our new training regime for investigators coupled with the use of advanced investigative systems will see all crimes professionally investigated.

When the EU Victims Rights Directive becomes law, I'm proud to say that we'll be ahead of it - we've already applied its principles.

I am determined that there will be a step change in the relationship between An Garda Síochána and victims of crime. Victims will be central to how we provide a professional policing service. We will be leaders within the justice system when it comes to dealing with victims. We're on a journey. We're at the beginning of that journey. And we'll learn, every step of the way of that journey.

Our new approach to how we treat victims of crime and whistleblowers demonstrates our changing culture.

Like any organisation this size and scale, an organisation embedded in how this State has developed since its foundation, it is not possible to change its culture overnight. And this was recognised by members of the Authority at our last meeting.

Nor should the best elements of our culture – our dedication to duty, our esprit de corps, and our close relationship with the community - change. Not now. Not ever.

However, we've been criticised for being insular and defensive, and for not accepting constructive criticism.

We are not alone in this. Dame Shirley Pearce, Chair of the College of Policing in the UK, found in her review of policing in the UK that the nature of police work with its high levels of personal risk can encourage a tendency to stick together in the face of threats.

That should not be seen as making an excuse. Renewing our culture is an imperative because of the massive level of change An Garda Síochána's going through. That's why it's a cornerstone of our Modernisation and Renewal Programme. It's the very first chapter, but every action in the Modernisation and Renewal Programme will cause cultural change.

In my view, the culture of an organisation is like a mosaic made of up big and small pieces that all play a part in creating a culture. Even adjusting one piece can have a significant impact on the whole picture.

Culture change is taking place in An Garda Síochána and this will accelerate over the coming years.

Here are just a few examples of this:

- Before the end of the year, and as discussed at our last meeting, we will put in place a biannual climate survey so that the experience and expertise of all Garda employees can be leveraged to see what we are doing right and what we can do better. This will be used as a baseline to measure our progress.

- Our new approach to training student Gardaí introduced in 2014 focuses on developing their problem-solving and analytical skills, as well as learning on the ground from the experience of long serving Gardaí.

- PULSE has been updated to ensure that nominated supervisors are now allocated to every incident. Superintendents now also have enhanced management information for their daily Performance Accountability Framework meetings.

- We are setting new expectations for our managers.

- Our new organisational structure will see more decision-making devolved from Garda Headquarters to the regions, with responsibility and accountability being clearly assigned.

- Roles, responsibilities and accountability for all ranks and grades will be more clearly outlined

- A new governance framework is being introduced with revised practices, procedures and policies.

- Our people will be given the tools and supports they need to do their jobs

- We are increasing our collaboration with communities, industry, academia and other policing and security services to make sure we provide the service that is needed to meet today's challenges.

The objective is a police service that is professional, accountable to the people it serves, performance-driven, with clear governance and oversight structures internally and externally.

Much of this depends on sustained investment and the continued input and support of the Policing Authority. I should mention, in that context, the feedback we received on the Programme when we sent a draft version to you in April. Thank you for that.

An Garda Síochána is committed to working constructively and openly with our oversight and regulatory bodies who have an important role in not only ensuring the public trust in policing, but in helping to improve the service we deliver to the public.

In recognising the importance of the Policing Authority's role in that regard, it is vital that the interactions between An Garda Síochána and the Policing Authority serve to re-assure

the public that An Garda Síochána is working hard to protect and support communities, particularly victims of crime.

An Garda Síochána has been able to protect communities and this country through our moral authority as servants of the people. The trust between the people and An Garda Síochána has been built-up over generations and has been vital to this nation's security.

Every one of us in An Garda Síochána must work hard every day to re-enforce that trust through our actions as professional, diligent, and empathetic Garda, Civilian and Reserve members. In doing so, we help make Ireland a better place to live in, to work in, to visit, and invest in.

Now, I want to address the recent appointment of Assistant Commissioners and Chief Superintendents because this has been portrayed in some commentary as duplicitous and disrespectful of the Authority because such appointments will be made in future by you, which we welcome. It was neither. It was an overdue, urgent and essential step towards filling crucial deficits that were preventing us from doing everything we need to do. And the necessity of those appointments being made when they were made was recognised by the Authority.

I look forward to the Authority's support in filling the remaining positions needed at Assistant Commissioner level, and the consequential need to fill posts at Chief Superintendent and Superintendent level, where, right now, we're significantly below the numbers we had 5 years ago.

I also look forward to working with the Authority in ensuring we further professionalise the organisation with the recruitment and appointment of suitably skilled civilian members, starting with the appointment of the Chief Administrative Officer.

Finally, before questions, Chair, let me say that over the next five years we won't get everything right. Mistakes will be made. But we will learn the lessons, improve, and ensure those mistakes are not repeated. In this regard, our five year programme gives us a framework for progress and an ambitious set of targets. It will inform our future planning process and in particular our Strategy Statement and future Policing Plans, which we are confident will provide a framework to assist the Authority in overseeing the performance of An Garda Síochána.

We have to reform, but we're hungry to do much more than reform. We want to make An Garda Síochána the kind of police service other police services copy - and with your guidance and help, we'll do just that.

Thank you.