

# What We Heard 2022

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AN TÚDARÁS PÓILÍNEACHTA  
POLICING AUTHORITY

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## Chairperson's Foreword

From its inception seven years ago, the Authority has welcomed and availed of the opportunity to meet with and learn from Garda members and staff on the one hand and organisations who work with and support communities on the other. We hear and learn from statutory bodies, representative groups and individuals as well. All these engagements enrich our understanding and add depth and texture to our statutory role of oversight of the policing service provided by the Garda Síochána.

Inevitably, for much of the past three years the opportunity for in-person contact was profoundly limited by the reality of the pandemic and its associated restrictions. But virtual contact was maintained throughout and represented a vital input to the sixteen reports on the policing of the Covid emergency legislation to the Minister for Justice.

During the past twelve months, we have been able to increase the range of contacts and we thought it important to share the perceptions and experiences conveyed to us in that process.

It is important to note at the outset that this paper is not a scientific research document. It is not, and of its nature cannot be, a formally representative statement of uncontested findings. Neither is it a litany of allegations or accusations, nor of praise and success. It is a reflection of the lived experience of many people in communities who experience disadvantage and whose sense of safety is not as they, or anybody, would wish it to be. It is also a reflection of how those people report their experiences of engagement with the Garda Síochána and the perceptions of policing that can flow from that.

Understanding how safe people feel in their homes and their communities would be a crucial element of any Policing Authority's work. It has added significance in the context of the Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill which will shortly be introduced in the Oireachtas, having been approved by the Government in November 2022. The very specific responsibilities in respect of community safety that the legislation will assign to the successor to the current Authority adds urgency and substance to the work of engagement with communities and those who support them and makes it vitally relevant. It will be necessary to have a deep and continuing understanding of the realities of the lives of people across the state so that there will be a full appreciation of the extent to which people can genuinely feel safe.

The perception of not being safe can be as disturbing, as disruptive and as limiting as the objective reality.

This report may make uncomfortable reading for some. For those with statutory and other responsibilities, that their efforts are not bearing the fruit they expected; for the Garda Síochána, that their work is not being fully understood or appreciated; for those who represent communities, that people in those communities may not feel themselves being represented as they would wish. There may be some who feel that the views reflected argue from the particular to the general, that they draw broad conclusions from narrow experiences.

But, as noted earlier, that is not its purpose. It is intended to provide a sense of what people feel, whether those feelings or impressions are objectively grounded or not. The voices are authentic and it is important that they be heard and listened to.

For me, the report makes immensely reassuring reading — despite the immense sadness of the very difficult lives that so many people live. It tells us that the work of the Garda Síochána is appreciated; that excellence is recognised; that people actively want to have Gardaí among them, engaging with them, relating to them — a sentiment that is not universally expressed about police services in other jurisdictions. It tells us also that the people understand that the Garda Síochána cannot resolve community issues alone; that the support of communities and individuals must be the shared endeavour of all the relevant statutory agencies. There is a sophisticated understanding of what is possible underlying many of the views reported.

There are two other issues reflected that merit further consideration. The first is the sense of ‘ambiguity’ of the role of community Gardaí, at one moment supporting communities and at another bringing individuals to book.

The second is the perception of a hierarchy of policing, of Garda roles. The Authority has referred to this question in some of the Covid reports. There should be no such hierarchy of service and to the extent that it is believed to exist, within the organisation or in communities, every attempt should be made to dispel it. There is an encouraging understanding reported that much of the valuable work undertaken by community Gardaí cannot easily be quantified. But, as Einstein observed, ‘not everything that counts can be counted’.

This will not be the last word on the views of individuals or groups or communities on their experience of life and of policing. It is an important part of the work of the Authority and an essential contribution to its understanding. Increased engagement with Garda members and staff will also be a continuing feature of the Authority’s work. By its nature, however, and for obvious reasons, those engagements cannot lend themselves as easily to public reporting. But they, too, are an essential and crucial contribution to the understanding of policing and to the realisation of the shared desire that people can feel safe in their homes and in their communities.

**Bob Collins**  
**Chairperson**

## **1 Introduction**

In 2022 the Authority continued its engagement nationwide with communities, groups and organisations. This engagement took the form of meetings with individuals and groups — in person and online — and it was focused on listening to the lived experience of policing within these communities. These were conversations rather than interviews and the perspectives offered were varied and rich.

The Authority's engagement with communities does not claim to be representative or scientific, but that in no way lessens its relevance or validity. It focuses on the particular — particular communities and the individual and shared experience within those communities. The experience is not generalised but where there are common themes emerging across the communities spoken with, these are highlighted. This engagement is an opportunity for the Authority to hear and reflect on experience that is — arguably — seldom heard and not necessarily captured in surveys of attitudes that are statistically representative, but which do not perhaps capture the story of the sense of safety in certain communities.

The Authority places an emphasis on this engagement because it provides useful insights into how and where the policing service is experienced as effective and why it is effective — and when it is not experienced as effective, it gives a sense and perspective of why that is so. It is a useful source of information that informs oversight and complements the information and data provided to the Authority by the Garda Síochána and that available through crime data, national surveys and research.

This short report attempts to give a flavour of what the Authority heard in 2022 in these conversations. It does not attempt to capture all the issues raised. It is being published in the interests of transparent oversight but also in the hope that it might contribute to the important and ongoing public conversations about how policing and other community safety partners might best work to deliver safe communities in Ireland. It includes positive experiences of Garda initiatives and Garda work that has had significant positive impact on the lives of victims of crime and communities. It also reflects on those challenges that remain for policing and which result in low confidence, fear and a lack of safety or a sense of safety within communities, that impact on that community's ability to thrive.

In 2022 the Authority engaged with 27 organisations, groups and residents in communities located across the country. As always the Authority remains grateful for the generosity of time given by the people spoken with, and for the openness with which they discussed the reality of their lives.

## **2 Safety in the Community**

The Authority spoke with a range of communities across the country, most of which were located in what would be regarded as socially and economically deprived areas. There were common themes emerging from these conversations that related to the challenges these communities face. While each had its unique challenges, many in these communities spoke about not feeling safe and the lack of respite they had from daily fear and intimidation. They spoke about their concerns for their children and the impact of anti-social behaviours and drug related activity on their ability to go about the ordinary activities of daily life. There was a normalcy to the absence of a sense of safety and in some areas little optimism that it would change.

Practically, residents spoke about anti-social behaviour that results in their staying indoors, avoiding leaving their homes unattended, *'keeping the head down and avoiding eye contact'* when going to the shops and avoiding any action that might draw attention to themselves. Drug dealing and drug related activity means that where possible young children are being kept indoors rather than let *'play on the green or in the street'* for fear that they will be drawn into that economy. Methods used by communities in the past to come together to discuss community challenges, such as public meetings, were described as being no longer an option due to fear that those perpetrating the fear and intimidation within their community were present and watching at those meetings. That fear is in many cases being generated by people living within and known to the community and their pervasive presence contributes to its unrelenting nature.

There was a high degree of exasperation and frustration expressed that communities are in the chokehold of a number of individuals and that there appears to them to be no effective policing response. As one resident put it — *'Why can't the guards see what we see?'* This leads in some areas to the strong perception that some communities are not regarded as deserving of the protection of the police and a belief that drug dealing, intimidation and criminality that would not be tolerated in more affluent areas are permitted and contained within poorer areas. One community referenced the weekly steady stream of office workers walking into the area during their lunch break on a Friday to buy drugs for the weekend while others spoke to the *'brazenness'* with which dealers operated out of houses in the community.

That perception of containment is based on what was regarded as open drug dealing that appears to go unchecked and a sense that police visibility is only associated with raids and enforcement. It also has resulted in a lack of confidence to report crime. In some cases, communities expressed the desire to have a few hours in which they could confidently move around — where the stairwell would be free of dealers for a few hours. One community spoke of the short but welcome reprieve offered by the presence of the Garda van. Garda visibility in the community was described as low but when there, it disrupted the perpetrators of intimidation, giving a visible indication that Gardaí are operating in the area and, with that, a temporary sense of security.

It was reiterated across a number of conversations that few opportunities exist to see Gardaí engage positively with the community. In one area it was recounted, that children in the after-school facility, at a very young age, already had extremely negative perceptions of the Gardaí as they only associated police with house raids and taking people away, with no countering image or experience of the Gardaí as a service that protects their community or could be called on to protect them. In some communities it was the strong view that residents do not report crime as there is little faith that it will be acted upon. Specific instances of a lack of response were given as examples that generate an overriding sense of neglect and exasperation. In one example, a woman told the Authority that she was advised by a Garda to not go any further with a complaint as it would be dangerous for her in the community as those she was bringing a complaint against were known to be violent and he couldn't guarantee her safety. She spoke openly about how this impacted her sense of helplessness that there is no protection available. Her story and other examples of what were seen as an inadequate response by the Gardaí were the dominant narrative within that community, setting the tone for the expectations of and confidence in the Gardaí. Another example concerned a recurring incident which saw regular vandalism of a children's' play area — a resource that was critical for that community. The perpetrators were described as acting with impunity and brazen in proclaiming that the community could do nothing. The impact on community confidence in

the Garda Síochána due to the lack of an effective policing response was proportionately greater than the impact of the physical damage done. For that community in its conversations, the event was indicative of its relationship with the Garda Síochána and its interest or ability to keep them safe.

Not all of the safety concerns relate to policing — they included housing, lighting, refuse removal and education, as well as child welfare. There was a clear recognition that the issues communities face are complex, beyond the ability or remit of the Garda Síochána to solve alone, and require a number of state actors to work together. Reference was made to the importance that the Garda Síochána can work constructively with the local Housing Officer, Tusla, the HSE and local authority services. Frustration was expressed at what was seen as a lack of determined interagency working *‘that got things done’*.

In one community, examples were given of regular intimidation and anti-social behaviour by young children below the age of criminal responsibility that was significantly impacting the community and which the residents knew was not the preserve of the Gardaí. Residents also spoke about behaviours which in and of themselves they recognised may not constitute crimes, but the point was made that the absence of a crime does not equate to a sense of safety in the community.

### **3 Community Policing**

Despite this, the importance, potential and impact of good community policing was reiterated at every one of our meetings with communities. Specific Community Gardaí were referenced usually by their first name, with stories told of the positive impact they had on the community. These were Gardaí known within the community by name, who attended community events and often were involved in local sports clubs and familiar to young people in the area as a result. In some cases these Gardaí had now moved on or retired. When asked to describe what characterised good community policing those spoken to described a policing presence in the community that is consistent and invests time in getting to know people, groups and organisations. On a practical basis, this was described as Gardaí walking through the community, being available and approachable, taking an interest, knowing the people living there and being responsive. Community Gardaí needed to be present at community events and needed to build relationships in particular with young people in the areas. A sharp distinction was made between the impact of a Garda car driving through the estate or a Garda walking or cycling through the estate. While both constitute Garda visibility, the latter was what constituted community policing.

Turnover of Gardaí was referenced as something that militates against the development of strong community relationships. The Authority was asked also about how Community Gardaí are selected and whether the Garda Síochána has a way of ensuring that it is appointing people who are suited to the role or whether Gardaí feel they have to put in time in community policing to get ahead. It was acknowledged that it is not an easy role and not one to which everyone is suited, and examples were given of Gardaí that it was believed were not suited. When asked what this looked like, it was described as Gardaí who attended events out of perceived obligation rather than interest, who did not engage with the community or seek to know the community, who were *‘putting in the time’* so they could move on. The ambiguity within the role was spoken about wherein the Community Garda is forging relationships within the community but has also to enforce the law. Some residents spoke

about the courage and confidence needed to interact with some young people in the community on a human level rather than relying on interactions that come from a position of authority. These were not seen as common characteristics but a specific skill set and competence that sets a good Community Garda apart, and examples of Gardaí who excelled at this were given.

It was also remarked on a number of occasions that the perception is that Community Policing is not valued within the Garda Síochána — a perception that it is a type of policing that would come below the work of detectives and serious crime and below roads policing. The point was made more than once that it must be hard for Community Gardaí *‘to show what they have done’* compared to other types of policing that can show detections of crime or checkpoints and fines on PULSE. Quantifying the positive impact of conversations and presence is difficult but the communities were clear that there is significant policing value in these activities. And they felt that the Garda Síochána organisation should recognise that value on an equal footing with activity that is easier to count. Communities were clear that in terms of their day to day sense of safety, Community Policing is a key contributor. It was not an issue of more Gardaí, but more Gardaí present in and among the community on foot or on bikes rather than driving through in a patrol car. There was a realism as to the limits of what a Community Garda can achieve in terms of the issues facing these communities, but in terms of a sense of safety and reliability that presence was described as critical.

What emerged from the conversations was a clear sense that the community does not regard the Garda Síochána as a homogenous organisation. Within these same communities there can be a very constructive relationships with the Juvenile Liaison Officer and a positive relationship with the Community Garda. It was described how the good work undertaken by both can be undermined and set to nought in terms of community confidence in policing by the actions and behaviours of other Gardaí. It was remarked that within a family there may be times when a member of the family is subject to policing through a raid, stop and search or arrest but that same person or member of his or her family may find themselves in need of the police at other times. The confidence that person has to call on the police was described as dependent on how that enforcement activity was carried out and whether it communicated a sense that the police service is a service for all or that some are undeserving of respect or protection as a result of their own or members of their family’s prior actions.

There were examples of where Community Policing is working well. Community Gardaí who attend community venues regularly and informally for tea and conversation and by doing so are known to be available and accessible, not least for people who are fearful of being seen to go to the Garda Station or of using the confidential help line. In some communities considerable progress has been made to establish strong working relationships between the Garda Síochána and community groups and organisations that work with various groups within the community. There were examples of community groups such as domestic abuse support groups, Traveller groups and groups working in the areas of mental health and suicide prevention that spoke to the excellent relationships that had been developed with their Community Garda and the ease with which s/he could be contacted and accessed. Those relationships were the outcome of consistent investment of time by the Community Garda. School visits were also described as working well in some areas as a useful way to positively engage with children. These groups also spoke about examples of dealings with other Gardaí — in the station, on checkpoints and when reporting a crime — that were not positive and there was not a confidence that you can rely on a consistency in the way you will be treated, rather it was stated that it comes down to the disposition of the individual Garda.



While there were examples of good engagement with these types of groups, the area which consistently appeared to be a challenge was within communities themselves — areas within town and cities that are known to be challenged economically and socially and often prey to drug related crime and anti-social behaviour. Examples of these communities that were satisfied with the policing service were harder to find. The majority of the people who live in these communities are not members of community groups or organisations and therefore they do not have an easy access point to build relationships with local Gardaí. That is reliant on Garda presence in the community.

In addition to the issues described earlier relating to confidence and visibility, a key issue is a lack of communication or opportunity to voice and discuss issues within the community with the Garda Síochána. Some communities referenced consultations that had been held with them by the Garda Síochána and by other organisations. While there is activity and engagement during initial strategic assessments, it was commented that opportunities for participation fade thereafter. There was pessimism as to how meaningful such consultation have been as *'nothing happens'*. A view expressed was that the issues are known and that the intervention needed is not more consultation, but action and that people living in the community must be encouraged and enabled to participate in developing solutions. It was remarked that too often it is people outside the community with little experience of its dynamics or realities that are charged with creating solutions.

Local policing fora were described as having been very valuable as providing a table around which the Gardaí and the community could problem solve at a local level. Joint Policing Committees were described as too high level to deal with the specifics of problems in particular estates or small areas. The local policing fora were, by contrast, accessible to people living in the specific community and, it was stated, had facilitated informal, reassuring discussions with plain-clothed Gardaí.

In many of the communities spoken to, local policing fora have not started up again since the pandemic. Communities spoke about the impact of there not being a local policing forum and there being nowhere to go to have vital discussions about what is troubling the community and impacting its sense of safety. In each case it was something that they wanted to see reinstated as in their absence they were unsure as to how the Garda Síochána could be assured that it was aware of the communities' concerns.

#### **4 Drugs and Drug Related Intimidation (DRI)**

The significant success the Garda Síochána has had in terms of the seizure of drugs and disruption and prosecution of organised crime gangs is well documented. The impact of drugs, drug related crime and intimidation on communities is something about which the Authority has heard consistently over the years and this continued in 2022.

The Authority's focus has been on the impact of drugs and drug related crime on local communities and how policing has responded to that impact. This is not a problem that is the preserve of certain areas, certain types of people or certain groups in society. It was described as potentially visiting any front door and it was remarked that the pandemic has seen it visit more middle class doors than before. Drug related crime and intimidation and anti-social behaviour were cited in each community spoken with as impacting their sense of safety.

The Authority heard about the extent of the violence being used to extract drug debts and the extent to which any relative of the person in debt becomes a target for drug intimidation —

grandparents, siblings, parents — creating ripple effects of intimidation with the repercussions felt by entire families. Drug dealers and the debt collectors to whom they sometimes outsource the intimidation often live within the community itself. It was described that the problem families face is that they regard the debt as genuine but the people they are dealing with are not and so a debt paid can turn into a greater debt that remains to be paid. These ‘enforcers’ are not reasonable people who operate within the norms of any sense of fairness.

The Authority heard of the manner in which people are drawn into debt beyond the cost of any drug purchases they may have made and how they can be pressured to undertake criminal acts themselves to service a debt — for example by storing drugs in their own home or indeed in some cases being asked to intimidate and extract a payment from another individual in debt to the same dealer. There is a culture of fear in which victims of intimidation are terrified of the repercussions of reporting with families described as being afraid to contact the Garda Síochána, having been warned not to by drug dealers. High profile examples of physical violence in the community serve to act as a warning as to what will happen if debts are not paid. One community spoke about a number of recent suicides, the cause of which they attributed to drug related intimidation, commenting however that the deceased’s drug debt typically endures and would likely pass to the family.

The backlog in the courts arising from the pandemic was mentioned as a concern that perpetrators are arrested, put on bail and then soon back out in communities engaging in crime. These persons are said to be well known amongst affected communities. This can, it was said, lead to a sense that these people are untouchable. It was suggested that increased prosecutions for drug related intimidation would change the public narrative around the policing response — that reporting can have a positive outcome. In response to the instances of drug related intimidation they know to be going unreported one community group described how it has formalised its approach to gathering data on intimidation within the community.

The Garda Síochána has appointed an Inspector in each Garda Division with responsibility for dealing with drug related intimidation (DRI). In some communities there was an awareness that this role existed, in others there was not. The communities talked about the difficulties faced by the Garda Síochána particularly around providing advice to people in debt to the perpetrators of intimidation. One group remarked that when they raise issues with the Gardaí on behalf of families they are told to ask the victim’s family to call or email. In the absence of either, the response is then said to be that without a direct complaint nothing can be done. Those spoken with said that their experience is that people facing drug related intimidation often do not communicate by email or text. Instances were described where dealers had taken and checked the phones of those in debt to them to be assured that there had been no contact with the Garda Síochána. It was felt that Gardaí often fail to understand this and it can result in a breakdown of communication.

Facilitating contact between the Gardaí and those experiencing intimidation was described as not easy in a situation where many described the individual’s or family’s fear of being seen to talk to a Garda. What emerged is that for many the key role the Gardaí play is in offering reassurance and support in how best to stay safe in this situation. Some community groups talked about how they help to facilitate contact between individuals and the Gardaí quietly, in neutral venues and to build connections between the local Garda and those in the community they know to be vulnerable to drug related intimidation. It was also remarked that *‘the better Gardaí’* realise that applying pressure on the individual or family to make a complaint — however well intentioned — can increase the

family's resistance to engage with Gardaí. The more successful engagements were described as those where the initial conversations focus on harm reduction and the safety of the family or individual and how this might be increased. Even for those that never make a complaint and/or end up paying the debt, it was emphasised that there is great value and comfort for the family or individual in that Garda support. This can be negatively impacted when there is, in a moment of heightened fear or crisis, an inability to access the individual Garda, due to leave or the station phone not being answered. In this context one group raised concerns about phones not being answered at Garda stations. The example was also raised of a family with a 'flag' on their number at the station they phoned, waiting hours for a Garda to provide assistance. This type of poor response from the Garda Síochána creates a disincentive to reporting in the future.

The existence of the DRI Inspector was welcomed where it was known they were in place. In many communities there was no awareness that this post existed within the Garda Síochána. It was emphasised in more than one community that there is a need for more public awareness as to the prevalence of DRI, the existence of the DRI Inspectors and that the Garda Síochána can be contacted in a way that acknowledges their fears. It was remarked that for many families there is not only fear but also shame and embarrassment and a lack of awareness that so many others are going through the same situation. It was believed that a national campaign might contribute to greater engagement from families who find themselves in this situation.

Communities were clear in their view that addressing drug dealing and intimidation is not only a policing issue. And communities consistently referenced their frustration with other statutory organisations. More than one community group spoke to the need and potential for the local authority to remove dealers who are their tenants from houses in the communities and the need for the council to work more proactively with the Garda Síochána to consider Section 15 removals. This process was seen as unnecessarily slow. In some cases it was remarked that the families experiencing the intimidation were moved amounting to what was seen as a '*punishment*' for the family experiencing the intimidation, who had to leave their community while the perpetrator was left in place. Another example given was the illegal breeding of certain breeds of dog in communities for the purpose of intimidation. It was described that the community had notified a range of authorities, with no action arising.

There were also questions raised as to whether in some areas one Inspector for DRI is sufficient to cover what can be large geographical areas.

## **5 Community Policing and Young People**

The Authority sought to understand children and young people's experience of policing. What emerged was that children have views of policing from an early age, garnered from what they see and hear and how they are interacted and dealt with by Gardaí. Some organisations working with children spoke to the excellent work being undertaken by Gardaí in the area of child protection, while as discussed later, the work being undertaken by divisional protective services units in the area of child sexual abuse was highlighted.

In terms of the involvement of children in drug related activity — consumption or dealing — a number of communities spoke about how young children were being lured into both dealing and taking drugs. One individual, experienced in working with communities over the past thirty years,

made the point that children were now accruing debts and being subjected to drug related intimidation for cannabis, whereas previously this was only the case for Class A drugs such as heroin or cocaine. They also stated that the potency of the cannabis that children now use means that it costs more and makes them behave more aggressively, creating a different culture around the drug than had been seen previously. In terms of the age at which children are being lured into acting as 'runners' for dealers, the Authority heard of children as young as six but more typically between eight to 12 years of age. A common theme emerged in discussions with communities across the country as to how dealers target children — they seek out children they know to be in already vulnerable positions, befriending them with gifts of luxury, high end shoes and clothes or giving 'freebies' of nitrous oxide or cannabis that land them in debt for drugs consumed with their having to work off the debt for the dealer. In one area it was stated that the seeming ease with which money can be made at a very young age for the simple task of transporting packages over short distances entices children into criminality. One group stated that they now use the terminology 'child trafficking' to describe what is happening within communities to convey the full extent of the abuse and exploitation faced by children.

The susceptibility to becoming involved in drug activity was described as even greater when young people believe their opportunities for employment are already stymied by virtue of their home address or membership of a certain community. One Traveller woman spoken with commented that some young men in her community found it easier to begin dealing drugs as they were less likely to 'get hassle' from the Gardaí than when attempting to engage in legitimate work, and could make more money. She remarked that when Gardaí warn communities not to engage with Travellers who are offering to do, for example, tarring or work around the house it is no incentive to young Traveller men — commenting that their experience was that '*...a white van gets stopped more often than a white Saab.*'

The Authority had the opportunity to meet with a group of youth workers with significant experience of working with children and young people in one of the urban areas dealing with the issue of drugs and young people. They spoke of their real concern for the relationship that exists between young people and the Garda Síochána in their area. There was unanimity that young people in the area did not trust the Gardaí and it was remarked that '*the Garda is not a safe person in our community*'. Interactions were described as '*unprofessional*' on the part of the Garda Síochána. The youth workers described how the Gardaí at times respond to challenging behaviour by young people with behaviour that is inappropriate and '*equally childish*'.

A number of examples were shared which characterised interactions between the Gardaí and young people as tense, disrespectful, and at times humiliating for the young person involved. There were reports of verbal abuse, as well as physical assault. Practices were described such as seemingly unwarranted confiscation of cash, clothes or phones. Examples were given of Gardaí deliberately goading young people into violence so they could be arrested and one example was given of Gardaí going out of their way to significantly humiliate a youth in front of his peers.

The youth workers spoke of the challenges for Gardaí of being called names and verbally abused by young people and they acknowledged that the actions of certain young people towards the Gardaí was unquestioningly wrong. But they also spoke of their expectation that this should not license the Gardaí to be violent towards the child, with the question asked — '*who is the adult here?*' The view was expressed within the group that children from certain areas are not seen as children and as such

are not seen as deserving of any recognition of their inherent vulnerabilities and immaturity as children, as would happen within the Garda Síochána organisation if the child presented as a victim of or witness to a crime. Coupled with this was the view that in many instances these children are themselves coming from chaotic, traumatised backgrounds that may include addiction and/or domestic abuse but that there appears to be little cognisance of that trauma. The youth workers asserted that children do not by virtue of their actions become less deserving of being recognised as children and treated with respect.

There were positive examples given of individual Gardaí who again — known on first name terms — were cited as examples of how it could work well. There was considerable discussion as to the skills needed to engage with young people — the skill to de-escalate situations and to engage in a way that meets the child or young person where they are at, with a recognition of their vulnerability. The youth workers have empathy for Gardaí who they believe often act out of fear in these situations with a response that draws on their authority rather than their humanity. This theme was echoed in other communities and among certain groups that there are particular skills needed in dealing effectively with young people.

## **6 Mental Health and Addiction**

The Authority met with a number of people working in the area of mental health and it was also a topic that arose in conversations with communities. One organisation working in the area of suicide prevention spoke about what they have observed as an increase in assault on parents by their teenage children, an increase of males using the service and an increase of bereaved elderly people using the service since Covid. They have also seen an increase in suicide and drug use in their area. They spoke positively about the responsiveness of local Gardaí when they call on them to check on individuals who are suicidal and the challenging situations Gardaí find themselves in as a result. A number of communities spoke about the unrealistic expectations placed on Gardaí to deal with instances of individuals having a mental health crisis in the absence of trained mental professionals being available. Families call on the Gardaí who have a limited number of options open to them and are not in a position to guarantee families that their intervention will result in access to the appropriate services.

## **7 Domestic Abuse**

The Authority has acknowledged many times over the past number of years the progress that has been made in improving the policing response to victims of domestic abuse in terms of the focus, approach and resourcing given to this area of policing. During the pandemic, Operation Faoiseamh was an early targeted response that anticipated the rise in domestic abuse. The Authority has consistently heard that the impact of that operation as well as the availability of protective services unit in each Garda Division has significantly improved the service available to survivors of domestic abuse and sexual crime.

The Authority continued in 2022 to meet with organisations and groups around the country working with survivors of domestic abuse and sexual crime. Many of the key themes heard during the pandemic endure. Examples were given of instances where the Garda involved *'went above and*

*beyond* what was expected, with another group describing aspects of the service given as *'incredible'*.

Particular mention was made of initiatives in Meath and Limerick where Gardaí are working with survivors in high risk situations. Operation Sabháilte was cited as an operation that was providing a much better experience for survivors. This pilot scheme in which two specialist Gardaí are allocated to spend time with survivors in a safe environment with the time to listen and take a statement at a pace that saw the survivor more likely to stay with the criminal justice process. It was remarked that this area of policing continues to evolve and the Garda Síochána has been proactive in improving its services to victims.

Where there is poor service to survivors of domestic abuse the view was expressed that this represents a deviation from Garda Síochána policy. It was felt that any such behaviour could not be attributed to a lack of clarity from the organisation as to what constitutes an appropriate policing response with the Code of Ethics, Domestic Abuse Policy, the Victims' Directive and Victims' Act all referenced as providing that clarity.

The key area of concern remains consistency of service or rather the lack of consistency. The organisations spoken with at local and national level stressed that these are exceptions to the rule of what is generally an excellent service and in some cases they are what was described as the remains of an old attitude and approach.

Organisations reported concerns in relation to Garda understanding of the relevant law, the Criminal Justice Act and its own Domestic Abuse Policy. It was stated on more than one occasion that there remains a lack of clarity on orders and breaches. Examples were given of unexplained delays of days between reported breaches of orders and perpetrators being picked up by Gardaí; a woman reporting a safety order breach being told that a court-appointed visitation order negated a safety order; and a Garda leaving an order in their locker for a week while they were on leave. Risks arising from the lack of clarity as to whose responsibility it is to serve orders were highlighted by explaining that a woman may be left to go home to tell a perpetrator that they must leave the house following the issuing of barring order and that this in itself increases the risk of provoking an aggressive reaction from the perpetrator. In terms of breaches of orders, an example was given of a case in which a woman received 40 harassing texts that was considered as one breach rather than 40. Cases such as these were said to add to the stress of the experience of the victim and create a lack of trust in Gardaí.

Other examples of a poor response given included not responding to breaches of orders; not asking any questions when responding; informing a survivor that no action can be taken if there is no order in place; and not checking on children in the home. The view was reported that calls are not always correctly classified as domestic abuse, and that victims are not always provided with a replacement phone when their phone is taken for evidence (as is legally obliged). This was described as *'basic stuff.'*

A number of groups raised their concern with regard to the new risk assessment tool being used by the Garda Síochána. The concern is less the tool itself and more the manner in which it can be

administered, which some said can re-traumatise the victim if undertaken as a checklist rather than a skilled and delicate conversation. Groups spoken to were strongly of the view that such an assessment would benefit from the inclusion of the local domestic abuse service in that process.

In terms of confidence to report, it was remarked that the fact that a number of cases have come before the courts in which the alleged perpetrators are Gardaí was welcomed. In the main the groups stated that it remains their experience however that survivors accessing their services, where their alleged abuser is a Garda, are unlikely to report.

Again it was stressed that these examples point to inconsistencies in the service rather than being indicative of the general service being provided.

## **8 Conclusion**

There is a richness to the experience described in these conversations. The experience cannot be generalised across all communities. Neither perhaps can what constitutes safety. It appears that safety for some communities is not just about stopping bad things happening, it is also creating the conditions that allow good things to happen — where children can play and residents can go about their day without fear. For communities that described themselves as traumatised and disconnected, the key themes emerging appear to be that policing can play a key role not just in crime prevention and detection but also in safety creation but that there are limits on what the Garda Síochána can do unilaterally. Policing interventions need to be directed towards the quality of life within the community and there is a need to ensure that the Garda Síochána has a clear sense of what impacts on that quality of life. Mechanisms that allow for engagement rather than consultation at local level between Gardaí and the community have been identified as important. The Authority has heard that more Gardaí does not necessarily equate to safer communities; this is impacted by how the Garda Síochána deploys Gardaí and the value it places on contact with the community, in the community.

Those spoken with articulated a clear sense of what ails their community and the complexity of the challenges they face. They also articulated a clear sense that policing is just one part of the solution and the creation of safety within communities requires proactivity and mutual accountability across many agencies and organisations. This is the context within which the new Policing and Community Safety legislation will recognise Community Safety and seek to put structures and practices in place that will stimulate this work.