

What We Heard 2023



AN TÚDARÁS PÓILÍNEACHTA
POLICING AUTHORITY

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Who We Are

The Policing Authority was established as an independent statutory body on 1 January 2016 to oversee the performance of the Garda Síochána in relation to policing services in Ireland.

The [Garda Síochána Act 2005](#), as amended (the Act), provides for an extensive range of functions for the Authority, some of which were previously the responsibility of Government or the Minister, including:

- Oversight of Policing
- Public Engagement and Awareness
- Appointments of senior members and staff of the Garda Síochána
- Research

Further details about the remit and full functions of the Authority are [available here](#).

1. Introduction

Listening is a key means by which the Authority informs its oversight of the Garda Síochána. Over the past number of years the Authority has engaged with a broad range of groups, organisations and communities to understand their experience of policing. The outcomes of these engagements have informed the Authority's engagement with the Garda Commissioner and his senior colleagues, and have been presented in a range of Authority publications. These include the Authority's bi-annual Assessments of Policing Performance, the sixteen COVID 19 Reports produced by the Authority during 2020-2022, and in the *What We Heard* report published in 2023. This work continues.

The Authority also engages with Garda Members and Garda Staff in the course of visits to stations across the length and breadth of the country, attendance at checkpoints, meetings with various specialist units, etc. These engagements are separate from the more formal monthly engagements with the Garda Commissioner and senior management team and are focussed on understanding the lived experience of Members and Staff delivering frontline services to their communities. Through these engagements Gardaí and Garda Staff have been, and continue to be, generous with their time and open in sharing their views on their experience of policing and policing performance – both the challenges and the positives of the job. That generosity and the candour with which Gardaí and Garda Staff have approached these engagements has significantly informed the Authority's oversight.

This report presents a summary of the key themes that have emerged from our engagements with Gardaí and Garda Staff nationwide during 2023. These themes are garnered from across 74 engagements with the workforce, including: meetings with specialist bureaus, units and functional areas; station visits covering interactions with a wide range of Members and Staff; attendance at Regional and Divisional management meetings; and, meetings with frontline Members and Staff. Many of the interactions arose in the context of engagement that occurred in preparation for and during the Authority's meetings in the community – held in Dublin's North East Inner City (NEIC), Drogheda, Mayo and Waterford.

The report does not claim to be scientific, representative or generalisable. Nor does it attempt to capture all the issues raised. Rather, as with our listening work with groups and communities, this report presents what we have heard from the Gardaí and Garda Staff that we have spoken to during the year. 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 might continue to improve, both as a service to communities and also as an employer to approximately 17,500 Members and Staff.

How We Engage and Listen

The Authority's primary mechanism for engaging with the Garda Síochána, to monitor and assess performance, is through monthly meetings with the Garda Commissioner, a minimum of four of which are held in public each year.

The Authority's *Policing Strategy and Performance* and *Organisation Development* committees also meet with Garda management to review performance across the breadth and depth of the functions of the Garda Síochána as they relate to policing services and the management and development of the organisation.

Members and staff of the Authority also engage with the Garda Síochána at national, regional, divisional and station level on an ongoing basis. It is this engagement that informs this report.

How We Engage and Listen

The Authority also assesses performance through a programme of stakeholder engagements. These include Joint Policing Committees and a wide range of groups and organisations at national and local level. This programme of engagement and outreach seeks to listen to and understand the lived experience of policing from both a service delivery and community perspective, as well as the perceptions in the community as to its effectiveness. The Authority published an overview of the feedback and experiences of communities with whom it engaged, during 2022, in February 2023. This 'What We Heard' report is [available here](#).

Throughout the year, the Authority also reviews and analyses internal and external reporting from, and about, the Garda Síochána, as well as monitoring wider international trends and research concerning policing.

1.1 Morale and Constructive Feedback

It is important to note at the outset that, in the main, the continued enjoyment, passion and commitment of Members and Staff to the work they are doing came through during the conversations and engagements that were had throughout the year. Negative or constructive points were often followed with an explanation that this would improve the service provided to the public and make the job easier or more efficient, rather than being expressed as just a list of complaints.

In this vein, regarding morale, while there is a sense of change fatigue – arising from the necessary but wide-ranging change and modernisation projects ongoing within the Garda Síochána – and concern across several areas, in the main Members are quite positive regarding their career and their jobs. Members spoke of themselves and colleagues taking calls and other activity out of hours, while on leave, and at other times, as evidence of continued commitment despite some of the challenges raised. Frustration rather than low morale would perhaps best describe the sentiments expressed. Despite the focus on the challenges in this report, in the main, the feedback given on these challenges was presented by Members and Staff in a constructive and solution-focused manner.

2. Themes

The topics that arose in discussions with Members and Staff were wide ranging, but a number of consistent themes emerged, these are:

- Workforce Health and Wellbeing;
- Management of Change;
- Performance Management
- Specialist Support Capacity;
- Resourcing/recruitment and retention challenges;
- Organisational approach to training; and,
- A recognition of the lack of a performance management culture, and associated impacts on supervision and discipline.

Each of these is briefly expanded on below.

2.1 Health and Wellbeing

Members and Staff, particularly those at mid and upper management levels, have raised concerns regarding the capacity of the organisation to effectively respond to issues of workforce health and wellbeing. This relates to the organisation's capacity to manage sick leave and absence due to illness, as well as ensuring that Members and Staff receive appropriate supports following significant work incidents or in recognition of the impact of the work they routinely undertake.

Specifically, the capacity in the Chief Medical Officer's (CMO) office to ensure timely review and examination of cases was raised. Instances where private GPs had issued medical certs that were not subsequently reviewed by medical professionals in the CMO's office, due to resourcing issues, were described as common. While not questioning that the majority were legitimate, the issue of illnesses occurring quickly after transfer requests were refused was raised. Also the view was consistently expressed that there is a need for better governance and review around the allocation of Members to restricted/light duties (e.g. desk based work, reduced hours, daytime hours, etc.) without the input or review of organisational medical professionals. In the main, the view was expressed that this presents challenges relating to ensuring propriety and fairness when Members and Staff are signed off or placed on such duties without a robust assessment by trained medical personal within the organisation.

On a more day-to-day basis, the use of sick leave in place of annual leave – owing to resourcing challenges reducing the capacity to grant leave – has been reported as widespread.

Online Evaluation

Mandatory online psychological evaluation is now in place for certain personnel, such as those working in Divisional Protective Services Units (dealing with domestic, sexual and gender-based violence investigations), those involved in the analysis of seized devices, and other potentially traumatic roles. The consistent feedback provided by Members was that while this is welcome, important and necessary, in practice the online system that exists was described as formulaic and open to potential gaming of the system. The mandatory support is provided in the form of an online assessment. The outcome of the online questionnaire may or may not recommend that in-person

counselling is required. The form was described as being comprised of questions requiring a response on a self-assessed, sliding scale. The view was expressed consistently that it was relatively easy to avoid responses which would potentially flag health or wellbeing concerns, and thus avoid the prompt for further medical intervention.

The evaluation was also consistently described as insufficiently tailored to the individual's role profile. For example, we heard that a member dealing with child sexual abuse cases as part of their duties does not undertake an assessment that is sufficiently alert to the potential impacts of that type of work. Rather it is a standard template for all participants with the same questions concerning health and wellbeing generally. Equally the point was raised that there is no difference in the assessment for those who are in a managerial or supervisory role in these contexts, roles which may present additional pressures or strains in addition to exposure to potentially harmful material. The view was expressed that to provide meaningful support, the process needed to be more tailored to the job that Members and Staff are doing.

Although it was acknowledged that approaches to mental health and wellbeing are changing for the better, it was stated that there remains some organisational stigma regarding mental health. The primary fear expressed was that a negative evaluation would affect current or future career opportunities - this was a particular concern raised among Members at a supervisory rank.

2.2 Management of Change

There was a clear sense of change fatigue expressed, in particular among front-line Members and immediate supervisors. This was attributed to the wide-ranging organisational change projects being undertaken currently and over much of the last decade. While those engaged with, more often than not, acknowledged the benefits of many of these changes – such as moving to modern IT systems and processes from the old paper-based systems – it was consistently stated that the constant state of change was impacting Members and Staff. In a high proportion of instances, the Policing Authority staff engaged in these conversations were asked by Members to explain or provide the context behind a number of change projects due to what appeared to be an absence of information provided by the organisation. Specifically, there was a lack of awareness as to the policing case or rationale for the changes being brought in, which were seen by many as bureaucratic and being foisted onto the service to serve the needs of oversight. Changes were not perceived as being directed towards improving the experience for Garda Members and Staff or providing better policing outcomes.

There was a difference, however, between conversations with those awaiting the introduction of various change or IT projects and those working in divisions in which the systems were in place. For example, high levels of concern were expressed around the introduction of the Investigation Management System (IMS), particularly in divisions with high volumes of crime. The concern was not helped when considered in a context of existing concerns around Staff and Garda numbers. By contrast, the perspective of Members who had considerable experience of the system was that although there are still issues to be addressed and refined, they were unanimously of the view that 'they wouldn't be without it' and that it had real benefits for their day-to-day jobs and investigations.

2.3 Performance Management

Across the board, there was a view expressed that there is a complete absence of a performance management culture within the organisation. Members referred to the Performance and Learning Framework (PALF) system as at best a career development tool, rather than it functioning as a form of performance management. There is a sense that supervisors are constrained in what they can do from a performance management perspective; *“if someone turns up on time, leaves on time and does even the bare minimum in between”* they feel there is little that can be done to address behavioural or performance issues.

It was also referenced that there is a fear on some supervisor’s part to tackle poor performance in case it resulted in accusations of bullying or a grievance being lodged against them. It was suggested that a more robust approach to performance management would be welcomed, in particular by those Members who see colleagues who are not being *‘pulled up’* on poor performance. The IMS and the daily Performance Assurance Framework (PAF) meetings were seen as positive developments by supervisors, in that they provide a regular context for a discussion of performance, although not framed in that manner. They deliver clear records of individual activity against incidents and an ability to monitor work and point to any gaps or work not done based on objective data.

Relatedly, there is a widely-reported concern regarding discipline and a perceived unfairness in the discipline systems, including the lengthy timelines involved in the processes. Garda rank Members spoke to a fear of falling behind with incidents and being disciplined. The views expressed were that discipline is the first response of the organisation to difficulties, rather than performance management.

2.4 Specialist Support Capacity

Members consistently set out the view that there is a need for specialist, divisional-based capability for cyber and economic crime given the rapid increase in the scale and complexity of devices and cases. In terms of cyber capacity, Gardaí were very positive regarding the Cyber-Crime Hubs established by the organisation in 2022. The view was expressed that most, if not all, investigations now feature mobile phone/tablets/computers or other ICT equipment and that there is a need to expand these hubs/units on a 21 Division basis.

This also extends to the capacity of national bureaus, with Members reporting that the level of input and support offered by Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau and Garda National Economic Crime Bureau is constrained by capacity. There were numerous reports of large scale investigations remaining within divisions, where the size or complexity of the case may have seen it transferred to a national bureau. Similarly, units within divisions are dealing with a greater level of the workload on investigations as the level of support that can be offered is constrained. For example, it would be anticipated that while divisions would deal with the majority of fraud or sexual offence investigations, where a complex fraud comprising millions of euro worth of assets or a case of large scale or historic, institutional sexual abuse was discovered, it would in many cases be appropriate for specialists from the national units that have expertise in these investigations to take the lead or provide considerable support. Similarly, where there are large or complex investigations staying within divisions, it was outlined that often the local units will require the allocation of additional

regional or national resources and supports to undertake the investigation, however this is hampered by the availability of these resources. This is not confined to economic, sexual or cyber crime and expands to a number of regional or national support services and functions.

Similarly, units within divisions and nationally have noted that there is a need to increase the pace and capacity with which the organisation can identify, procure and deliver specialist software to units. This will help them in part deal with the above issues. It has been put forward that the money for capital ICT investment is in place but that the capacity of Garda ICT to provide all the necessary projects is limited, e.g. a Customer Relationship Management system for community policing, specialist identification software for image based sexual offence material, etc.

2.5 Resourcing and Retention Challenges

In the main, the management and front-line view regarding current issues on resourcing challenges, particularly in relation to retention, has been nuanced. Primarily there is a recognition among Gardaí that the recruitment and retention of Garda staff is the most pressing issue faced across all Divisions. This has consistently resulted in Members returning to duties previously civilianised under the workforce modernisation plan. As it has been described to the Authority, this results in the organisation not only having to remove a Member from a role requiring sworn policing powers but also places them in a role that requires specialist training or expertise that is best offered by appropriately trained Garda Staff.

In respect of Staff, the single consistent issue raised is the uncertainty around the terms of conditions following the commencement of the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024. This has seen significant numbers of Staff leave under the Civil Service Mobility Scheme across all divisions and increasingly is reported as affecting the higher ranking, and in many cases more experienced, members of Staff that are in crucial organisational roles. It is routinely provided that this will continue to have ongoing and lasting impacts on policing services unless comprehensively addressed and communicated to Staff.

In terms of attrition of Garda Members, the consistent view expressed was that there are two main categories of Members leaving:

- Those that are *'good people and good guards'* but that they have received offers of employment or wish to seek other employment that offers better pay, better work-life balance, is more geographically suited, or a mixture of these factors;
- Those that just are not suited for the job and it is best for them and the organisation that they leave – some of these are seen as unfortunate resignations but for the best, while others are seen as being positive resignations as the individuals concerned were not suitable for the role of a Garda Member.

Reference was also made to increased accountability for work return, through the IMS and PAF, having influenced some of these decisions. In the main, the general view was not one of concern that the Garda Síochána is facing a retention 'crisis' or an 'exodus' of good people. It was also acknowledged that – as is a challenge faced by many industries – for younger generations there is less attraction to the concept of a job for life, and that there are a far greater range of career and employment opportunities available to people than in previous generations.

In terms of Garda recruitment, there is an understanding of the reasons why the shortfall exists given the Garda College closure during COVID-19, but there is huge frustration with the resulting shortages in stations and units. In particular, the view was expressed that the recruitment into specialist units is depleting the 'regular' to unsustainable levels. While appreciating that these units perform important work, the view was expressed that until such time as the organisation regains the ground lost during COVID-19, continuing to pull Members from the regular to bolster numbers in the specialist units will not be sustainable.

If possible, the Authority frequently poses a question to Members if *"you would encourage young people you know to join, or become a guard?"* This receives quite a split response with many saying they would, as it is a good career, and many other saying they would not. In such cases it is frequently cited that the job *"isn't what it used to be"*, that society and the role of the guard has changed, there is less respect for the uniform, and that the pay, pension and conditions are not attractive or desirable when compared to the other opportunities and careers available to young people. Others respond that it is a meaningful and rewarding career, with the opportunity to make a difference within communities, along with offering considerable variety of roles and experiences.

2.6 Organisational Approach to Training

Training is an almost universal topic of concern for Members and Staff both from a personal capability perspective and from a management one. In particular there is a concern that post-COVID-19, the previously existing issues regarding training capacity and delivery have been exacerbated and that the organisation is struggling to meet demand, while ensuring that the necessary level of quality is achieved.

Firstly, regarding new recruits there is a consistent view that the training programme currently being used for trainees in Templemore is not fit-for-purpose and that the probationers coming out after the initial 11-week training round are insufficiently prepared for front-line service. This is not a comment on the quality of candidate, rather it is a view that the foundational knowledge to be placed in the role of a Garda, albeit a trainee one, cannot be sufficiently taught in a time lesser than that of an undergraduate college semester.

Secondly, for Members established in roles, there is a concern that the organisation has not managed to ensure that there is sufficient continuous professional development (CPD) training available to enable members to keep up-to-date on the latest developments in their fields or to engage regularly with their peers to share learnings and experiences. This is keenly felt at mid-management ranks/grades.

Thirdly, there is a concern regarding the organisation's approach to training of specialist Members and Staff commencing new roles. There is a concern around an apparent lack of formal training and support for a wide range of roles, including staff roles where individuals are being recruited from generalist panels and placed in specific functional roles. This is cited as contributing to attrition.

In respect of all of these cohorts, the concern has been raised regarding the increasingly common online-by-default approach to training. Members feel that this is a decision based on training output rather than outcome, and that there should be a move to a blended model. It is regularly cited that the peer-to-peer learning, including the sharing of wider experiential learning, is completely lost in online learning formats. It is also a concern among supervisors that Members are being tasked with

completing online training without the requisite time being accounted for, and therefore training is being opened on a second screen while members are working/distracted, or else being completed late at night or out of working hours as this is the only available time to do so.

3. Conclusions

The Authority is grateful for the frank and open engagement that Members and Staff have with it in its visits nationwide and it will continue to engage with Gardaí and Garda Staff in 2024 and beyond. The outcomes of these discussions inform its understanding of ‘the job’, highlight oversight issues, and provide useful context for its engagement with the Garda Commissioner. There is no substitute for the invaluable first-hand experiences of those working in Garda stations, offices and units day-to-day across the country.

As such, the contents of this report provide important feedback to the Authority, the Garda Síochána, and other stakeholders as to the lived experience of delivering policing in Ireland in 2023 and of working in the Garda Síochána. While the views reflected throughout are not intended to be a comprehensive statement reflecting views held by all Garda Members and Staff, they are nonetheless based on the collective policing experiences of those engaged with. It is striking how many of the points raised are expressed to the Authority consistently across Divisions, units and ranks/grades. It is hoped that these experiences and views will continue to help inform the ongoing development of the Garda organisation and the services it provides.

As noted at the outset, the continued commitment and passion of the Garda workforce generally is clear to see, despite the current challenges and pressures faced. The Authority would encourage that the contents are considered in the same constructive manner in which they were most often raised during our engagements.