

Joint Committee on Justice and Equality

Opening Statement

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Introduction

Good morning. Thank you for inviting Foróige to speak to this Joint Committee on Justice and Equality on the topics of community policing and rural crime. Given our experience with Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDP's) I will be focusing on community policing.

Foróige is a national youth development organisation, whose purpose is to involve young people consciously and actively in their own development and the development of society. This is carried out through a range of supports from universal volunteer led clubs to targeted interventions engaging with some of the most vulnerable and at risk young people and families in their communities.

Our primary experience with community policing is through the provision of GYDP's. There are 105 GYDP's nationally managed by a range of Community Based Organisations. Funded by the Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS), Garda Youth Diversion Projects are community based, multi-agency, youth crime prevention initiatives which primarily seek to divert young people involved in criminal/anti-social behaviour away from the criminal justice system by providing suitable activities to facilitate personal development, promote civic responsibility and improve long-term employability prospects (IYJS, 2017). Foróige manages 42 GYDP's nationally and is also funded by IYJS to provide a range of supports to GYDP's through the GYDP Best Practice Development Team.

Community Policing

The community policing service provides vital support to many of the young people, families and communities that we work with. Community Gardaí actively contribute to the diversion of young people from offending or further offending. This is done through building positive, trusting relationships in the community, engaging in partnerships with local agencies both voluntary and statutory and by being visible and accessible. The role of Community Gardaí in the early intervention and prevention of youth crime should not be underestimated. Children and young people tend to follow a pathway towards offending behaviour. There are also characteristics which make it possible to predict the likelihood of future offending (Hodge & Andrews, 2010). These developmental pathways and characteristics give families, communities and system the opportunity to intervene and prevent the onset of criminal and anti-social behaviour while also building strengths and resilience in young people. Focusing on the development of assets and strengths in young people while reducing the risks not only delivers positive outcomes for young people and families, but also contributes to the overall quality of life in a community and reduces the likelihood of the escalation of a young person's offending behaviour, thus reducing the burden of crime on society and the significant financial costs associated with that.

The research has clearly evidenced that the more contact a young person has with the justice system, the poorer their outcomes long term (McAra & McVie, 2010). It is important to intervene as soon as possible and as little as possible with a young person who is at risk of offending, to bring about a change in behaviour. Through their presence on the ground, Community Gardaí can monitor behaviour and identify young people who may be at risk of offending before their behaviour escalates to the point that they come to the attention of their other Garda colleagues. Quite often, the Community Gardaí will deal with incidents of anti-social behaviour in an informal manner with a young person, and this low level intervention is enough to have a positive impact on their behaviour. Where a young person or family may require a greater level of intervention, the inter-agency

approach of the community policing service allows Community Gardaí to make timely referrals to appropriate services which can meet the needs of the young people and their families.

GYDP's have greatly benefitted from the relationship with Community Gardaí, particularly in relation to early intervention with young people as outlined above. The partnership approach of the Community Gardaí has also been effective in identifying young people under the age of criminal responsibility who may be engaging in risky or antisocial behaviour. This has ensured that the appropriate supports are put in place for those young people under 12 years and has allowed us to address their risks and needs at an earlier stage using their strengths and interests to build skills, increase protective factors and reduce the likelihood of future offending. Engagement with Community Gardaí has allowed for frank informed conversations enabling us to monitor behaviour, respond quickly and appropriately and ensure better outcomes for young people

Community Gardaí contribute to youth projects and services and other community agencies in a wide variety of ways. By sitting on local committees they can contribute to a co-ordinated response to meeting community needs. Community Gardaí in many areas support GYDP's to develop a comprehensive analysis of youth crime in their catchment area using both PULSE data and local knowledge, which ensures that plans are designed which meet the specific needs of the community and take account of the nuances of their particular context. Across the country, Community Gardaí are involved in delivering a range of educational programmes in both the school and community setting. These ensure that young people and communities are aware of their rights and responsibilities, but also build trust and relationships between community members and An Garda Síochána. In our experience, Community Gardaí have accompanied Youth Justice Workers on visits to families experiencing chaos and trauma, have engaged with both mainstream and high risk young people in a positive, meaningful and non-judgemental manner, and have responded quickly and sensitively to young people and families in crisis. On a very practical level, there are many community projects and services who would be unable to engage in activities outside their meeting space were it not for the Community Gardaí supporting them with the use of the local Garda bus.

In a police force where there is a level of mistrust in many communities, the Community Gardaí are the exception to this. As the visible, approachable, friendly face of An Garda Síochána many young people and community members will reach out for help and advice from the person they have met at a local meeting, in the school corridor, in the community centre or walking through their estate, before they would ever consider going to the local Garda station for same. The ability to access the support of the Community Gardaí has benefitted many communities enormously from both a crime prevention and quality of life perspective. Those in the community policing service have managed to build positive effective working relationships with the community, voluntary and statutory agencies working in partnership with them. But equally, if not more importantly, they have built positive personal relationships with community members, young and old.

Challenges

With the many benefits outlined above, it has been disappointing to see the gradual erosion of community policing across the country over the past number of years. Many Garda districts and divisions do not have a dedicated community policing service, which results in a system which is constantly 'firefighting' and responding to issues as they arise, rather than pro-actively engaging in crime prevention and reduction measures.

Where Community Gardaí are present in communities, the benefits are tangible. However, with a reduction in resources and increased demand, we have seen many Community Gardaí pulled out of community duties in response to frontline operational needs. This prioritisation of regular policing duties has resulted in a loss of the preventative work of relationship building within communities. Many Community Gardaí who have retired or moved position have not been replaced. We have seen first-hand the challenges for Community Gardaí who wish to have a greater level of engagement with communities but because of the demands placed upon them can only engage in an ad hoc manner. Many communities are suffering as a result of the reduction in resources put into community policing.

Conclusion

Where present Community policing plays a significant role in crime prevention. In our experience with GYDP's the benefits in terms of targeting, early intervention, assessment of risk and need and intervention are clear. Community Gardaí identify young people at risk before they have been detected offending, often under the age of criminal responsibility, they support Youth Justice Workers to carry out assessments, engage with young people and families through the projects and deal with issues informally at local level before they escalate. They support interventions, in very practical ways as well as providing advice, support, information and educational programmes. Their partnership approach with community groups and other voluntary and statutory agencies ensures that community needs can be responded to in a co-ordinated and consistent manner leading to better outcomes for young people, families and communities. The main challenge that we see is the lack of resources put into community policing over the past few years, the fact that many areas do not have a service and where there is a service Community Gardaí are often directed to prioritise frontline operational duties to the detriment of their community duties.

Because of the vital role they play in early intervention and crime prevention, Foróige strongly advocates that appropriate and adequate community policing resources should be allocated in every Garda division and district so that all communities can benefit from the service. Foróige welcomes the new community policing framework and the establishment of the new Community Policing Offices in the 28 Garda Divisions. We believe that this is a positive development and are hopeful that it will support the allocation of appropriate resources to this essential community service.

References

- Hoge, R. D. & Andrews, D. A., 2011, Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory 2.0, User's Manual, Multi-Health Systems, Ontario.
- Irish Youth Justice Service, 2017, *Garda Youth Diversion Projects Operational Requirements*, IYJS.
- McAra, L. and McVie, S. (2010) Youth Justice? The Impact of system contact on patterns of desistance from offending, *SAGE Youth Justice*