



AGSI

Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors
Cumann Sairsintí agus Cigirí de'n Gharda Síochána

Statement to Joint Committee on Justice

Antoinette Cunningham,

General Secretary

22nd June 2021

ASSOCIATION OF GARDA SERGEANTS & INSPECTORS

Opening Statement

On the 11th March 2020 the Director General of the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The effect in Ireland was immediate with schools, colleges, childcare facilities and cultural institutions being closed, large gatherings cancelled, and followed by the closure of pubs, businesses, and the restrictions on the movement of people.

On the 16th March 2020, the Garda Commissioner notified the Garda Staff Associations that a policing requirement was needed and that with immediate effect all members would be moved from regular policing duties onto an emergency COVID Roster, moving from the mainly 6 days on 4 days off 10-hour shift pattern to a 12-hour 4-days-on, 4-days-off shift pattern.

The shift pattern would also mean the movement of AGSI from roles such as CPD, Garda College, Traffic and other non-core units onto the 12-hour shift to maximise the availability of available personnel.

With no objections, overnight notice, and with considerable disruption to family life, childcare and carer arrangements, members agreed and moved immediately to the shift patterns as set out by the Garda Commissioner in an effort to meet the requirements of policing the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is important to say at the outset that AGSI were not part of the decision-making process with regard to the Public Health Regulations or any related restrictions imposed during the health emergency. It was difficult at times to hear the role of Gardai played out in public debate however AGSI members were steadfast in their support of the Commissioner to provide the service that was required to police the Pandemic and continued to do their job with the utmost professionalism and dedication.

I would like to draw your attention to this (bulk of public health regulations), a visual representation of the regulations, which members of AGSI had to, and continue to, enforce. It was exhausting trying to keep up with new legislation and regulations imposed by the Government during COVID-19. With all training within the Garda Organisation suspended to move as many personnel as possible to the front line to assist in the 12-hour shifts, it was left to AGSI members to interpret, disseminate and instruct Gardai on new and additional powers. This interruption to training placed further responsibility and pressure on Sergeants and Inspectors.

The Regulations were frequently lengthy, complex in nature and required deep reading to understand and implement same. As the supervisory rank, this fell mainly to the members of AGSI, who highlighted the need for clear Organisational instructions on what elements of the Regulations were enforceable or not. While some assistance was provided from the Garda Síochána's 'Covid' Unit, by way of Organisational Instructions on the Garda Portal this was not sufficient and required the input of Sergeants and Inspectors to ensure its proper dissemination to colleagues.

Regulations and Statutory Instruments followed in the weeks and months after the declaration of the pandemic and with **no** formal training of any kind provided to members of An Garda Síochána and AGSI. However, the 4E's approach, to Engage, Explain, Encourage and as a last resort Enforce Regulations was quickly understood by members and as Supervisors, we constantly reminded our colleagues that our interactions with the public must be fair, reasonable, equitable and respected the human rights of all persons and that engagement was a key element in seeking the co-operation of the public.

As an Association however, we were deeply concerned at times to hear of planned pieces of legislation debated through the National airwaves and media that would impact the membership we represent and pose challenges to the well-established Garda power that exist. These included suggestions the Gardai could enter people's homes to check if they were 'quarantining' and matters relating to house parties and gatherings in people's private dwellings. We provided clarity as best we could that the Constitutional rights of citizens must always be protected and that can only be

changed in accordance with law, however as an Organisation and an Association we are apolitical and could not enter into public political debate on matters.

Of primary concern to us was the impact of the pandemic on the health and safety of our members. This was particularly relevant when the Mandatory Hotel Quarantining was introduced by Government and the Garda role, while downplayed at first became obvious very quickly when difficulties emerged. Of particular concern here was the lack of vaccinations for Gardai assigned to deal with this duty particularly when it emerged that all other parties involved in the process were vaccinated. This again was an area where much more could have been done much quicker to protect Gardai who felt very vulnerable in this disproportionately high-risk environment.

The establishment of the Divisional Protected Services Units prior to the pandemic proved invaluable in their ability to make regular contact with victims of domestic abuse to provide reassurance and support, as well as progress investigations and AGSI used every opportunity through their own internal communications, media and social media to remind colleagues that the Regulations and travel restrictions did not apply to victims of domestic violence.

We are always conscious of the Constitutional Rights of members of the public. However, we can reference the Grafton Street protest on the 27th February where the right to protest and the policing requirement were severely tested and the deliberate firing of a missile at Gardai showed the dangerous and hostile environment that can emerge from such protests. When further conflictual and public order incidents arose, criticism was levelled the appearance of our members in 'riot gear' while the issue of the need to wear same for the protection of members didn't appear to be properly recognised.

In relation to engagement with the Staff Associations by Government on the policing of the pandemic, there was none. While the short time frame at the beginning of the pandemic required urgent decision making, as we moved through the initial weeks of the pandemic there was adequate opportunity for engagement by Government and AGSI believe there was a missed opportunity here.

With the country in lockdown, the Garda focus was on immediate high visibility patrolling, and a particular on supporting the elderly and vulnerable in Communities. Additional 'community-based patrol cars' were provided to the Organisation and these, along with the extra re-deployed personnel proved an invaluable resource in allowing gardai to do what they do best, interacting with Communities, delivering groceries and prescriptions, assisting in small domestic chores for elderly people living alone, checking on relatives for people who could not visit their own families, and having many a reassuring social distance chat. No training was needed for these tasks, as they are embedded in the culture and ethos of the Gardai 'to protect and serve' and are part of what most Gardai aspire to do when time, resources and situations allow. 24hr static checkpoints were established on designated arterial routes as well as overt patrolling on foot and vehicles and again while no specific training was provided for this, members were generally aware of what they were required to do.

Supervisors took up the mantle during pre-tour briefings to update and provide 'on the job' training to colleagues on the new elements of regulations which required their attention.

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As regards resources, the matter of PPE and the availability of same became an immediate issue of concern for the Garda Staff Associations and throughout the first number of weeks members were reporting issues around the lack of basic PPE such as hand sanitiser and masks. These however did become available but more serious matters like priority testing for Gardai remained a real concern with no special arrangements put in place for Gardai who had been in contact with suspected

COVID members of the public. Of particular concern and distress was the large number of times members were spat at with blood or saliva, and this was particularly distressing and difficult for members to deal with physically and emotionally. No safe places for gardai to isolate were provided, and members were left with no choices but to return to family homes or other locations where there were genuine fears of spreading to elderly family or relatives. As an Association we feel more could have been done for Gardai in the areas of priority testing, vaccinations and places to isolate away from family when they had been in contact with suspected COVID positive people. Christmas and January 2021 were particularly challenging with a large amount of the Garda workforce absent on COVID related issues and again members were very concerned about themselves and their families.

Finally, we mention the concern that the Regulations became viewed as 'Garda Regulations' and would ask was enough done to publicly remind people that they were in fact **Health Regulations** for a specific purpose and that they would cease when the requirement was no longer needed. This we believe was and still is necessary to protect the relationship between the gardai and the public and uphold the model of 'policing by consent' which is of the utmost importance.

Policing the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the biggest policing requirements made from AGSI members. All of them unquestionably and immediately committed to support the Garda Commissioner and the Government in its efforts to stop the spread of the virus and do whatever was required of them in this regard. They adapted in the most challenging of circumstances and took on the raft of new Regulations and Legislation and were mindful at all times to ensure that enforcement was as a last resort only.

The adaptability and flexibility of members was proven again and again and the Community Based Policing approach was forefront in the minds of AGSI members who led by example with colleagues to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable in Communities. The 'esprit de corps' and can-do attitude prevailed during the 12-hour checkpoints, protests and other challenging environments the AGSI members found themselves in.