



Simon Communities of Ireland
submission to the
Garda Síochána Corporate Strategy 2010-2012

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Introduction

Simon: the homelessness charity

The Simon Communities throughout Ireland provide the best possible care, accommodation and support for people experiencing homelessness and those at risk. Together, with people who are homeless, we tackle the root causes, promote innovative responses and urge the government to fulfil their commitments. Simon Communities are based in the following locations throughout Ireland Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the South East and the North West. The Simon Communities have been working with people experiencing and at risk of homelessness in Ireland since 1969 and work with approximately 5, 000 people per year.

Our mission is to work with people who experience homelessness and housing exclusion in Ireland by:

- Assisting people at risk of becoming homeless.
- Campaigning for legislative and policy changes and resources that will deliver responsive services for people experiencing homelessness.
- Providing quality care, accommodation, projects and services which support people to move into appropriate independent or long term supported accommodation.

The Simon Communities, in partnership with local authorities, the Health Service Executive and other voluntary service providers deliver a wide range of essential services to people who are homeless throughout Ireland. These services include street outreach, emergency accommodation, transitional and supported housing, innovative detoxification and employment projects, settlement and tenancy sustainment services.

Our Strategic Plan 2006-2009 emphasises our increased commitment to delivering high quality person-centred services across all aspects of our work; measuring the outcomes of our interventions with a view to ongoing improvements; and striving to deliver our services through a framework of human rights. We are in the process of developing our new strategic plan.

The Garda Síochána Corporate Strategy 2010 -2012

The Simon Communities of Ireland welcome the opportunity to make a submission with regard to the development of the Garda Síochána Corporate Strategy 2010 -2012. The work of An Garda Síochána throughout the country is highly relevant to the activities of the Simon Communities of Ireland. We believe that building good working relationships with the Gardaí is of mutual benefit to both organisations and can make a contribution to the realisation of our respective objectives. In this regard it is encouraging that the Gardaí have in recent years demonstrated a much greater focus on engaging with and serving the entire community, including those who are most marginalised. 'A Time for Change', the Garda Síochána Corporate Strategy 2007-2009, identified a series of values to that reinforced this approach, including:

- Having respect for people and their needs.
- Protecting human rights.
- Being a courteous and caring public service.
- Maintaining partnerships with the community.
- Promoting and accepting diversity in all its forms.

Within the Corporate Strategy, the strategic goals focusing on public order, ethnic and cultural diversity and community engagement were linked to initiatives that further reinforced a community-focused approach. This included a commitment to engage with community and statutory stakeholders in developing and implementing responses to public disorder and anti-social behaviour. There is also further action planned in relation to community partnership building to enhance the delivery of services.

The Simon Communities of Ireland understands that the Corporate Strategy provides the overall strategic framework for policing in Ireland but that implementation, in general, happens at a local level through regional and divisional policing plans. However, it is essential that all policing plans are underpinned by such values as those outlined above and it is essential that they are enshrined in the new Corporate Strategy.

There are 4 key aspects of Gardaí operations to which we would like to draw attention, where continued or further action is necessary. These aspects are discussed in the following sections and can be summarised as follows:

1. Safer Public Places.
2. Engaging with People Experiencing Homelessness.
3. Good Working Partnerships with Homeless Service Providers.
4. Garda Vetting Procedures for Homeless Service Staff and Volunteers.

1. Safer Public Places

The desired outcome under the public order strategic goal of the previous Corporate Strategy of 'safer public places' is one with which the Simon Communities of Ireland would concur. It is however essential that Gardaí acknowledge the popular public misconception that people experiencing homelessness in some way negatively impact upon the safety of public spaces, particularly in urban centres. This misconception seems linked to wider stigmatisation of homelessness, where there is a perception that individuals who are homeless should not be present in public spaces and in such circumstances should be 'moved on' by Gardaí. Such an approach ignores the basic rights of any individual and would be inconsistent with An Garda Síochána's own commitments to human rights based principles in their 'Action Plan for the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Garda Human Rights Audit Report'. People experiencing homelessness have as much reason for concern about safety of such spaces as any other member of society. Indeed people experiencing homelessness are far more likely to be victims rather than purveyors of crime, and are generally at much greater risk than the wider community. Individuals who are homeless, unlike other members of society, often have nowhere else to go, and it is important that the Gardaí develop an understanding of their situation and their need for a place of safety, free from the threat of violence.

To date, Gardaí have generally not adopted the approach of 'moving on' people experiencing homelessness from public spaces, and it is important that this approach continues. It is acknowledged that particular issues are prevalent amongst those who use Simon Community service around the country which may result in occasional anti-social behaviour in public spaces. Where such instances occur, they should be dealt with by Gardaí while bearing in mind the situation of the individual. Gardaí do, and should continue, to work in tandem with our Communities and other homeless service providers to ensure that they are kept informed of such developments and can focus on providing the support that an individual needs to ensure that such difficulties are kept to a minimum and to facilitate early, appropriate intervention.

2. Engaging with People Experiencing Homelessness

As noted above, people experiencing homelessness are far more likely to have crimes committed against them than other members of society but yet are much less likely to report such crimes. It is therefore essential that such individuals are afforded the same protection provided to any other member of society. The majority of crimes against people who are homeless go unreported. This can be due to a lack of trust in Gardaí and a feeling that complaints may not be taken seriously because of their situation. Some people who are homeless have had negative experiences in this regard which discourage them from approaching Gardaí.

An Garda Síochána have demonstrated an ongoing commitment to engaging with the most marginalised in our society, and a central goal of the previous Corporate Plan was to meet the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse communities. The work of the Gardaí in actively engaging with communities and targeting those most at risk of social exclusion through the RAPID programme, Local Policing Fora and Joint Policing Committees is commendable. There is a need however to build on such activities and focus action on improving services for people experiencing and at risk of homelessness. A means must be found to ensure that individuals who are homeless feel as safe and protected as other members of the community and can be confident that any crime committed against them will receive due care and attention from Gardaí. One possibility that might be considered is the introduction of a system where alternative agencies with whom the person is more comfortable, such as designated homeless services, can act as the first point of contact in reporting a crime. They can then pursue the matter with Gardaí and help to ensure that the individual is not intimidated by the resulting process and is kept informed of developments. Such a remote reporting system was introduced in Edinburgh in Scotland with some success. We welcome the new innovative on-line reporting system and look forward to the evaluation of its effectiveness and the exploration of other remote reporting systems/options.

We would therefore recommend that within the Garda Síochána there is commitment to engage to a greater extent with people experiencing homelessness in recognition of the problems they face and specifically in relation to crime. There is potential to develop greater understanding throughout the Gardaí of the circumstances that lead to homelessness, the needs and individual situations of people experiencing homelessness, and the most effective ways of engaging with one of the most marginalized groups in society. In this An Garda Síochána could consider initiatives such as the distribution of information booklets to Gardaí to help them understand homelessness and to refer people to appropriate services and the inclusion of training on homelessness and related issues within An Garda Síochána training programmes.

3. Good Working Partnerships with Homeless Services

Many of the Simon Communities have developed good working relationships with local Gardaí and we feel it is essential to maintain and build upon these relationships in the future. We also believe that it is firmly in the interests of An Garda Síochána to encourage such links, particularly via development of the community-policing model. Our aim, to secure successful progression into permanent sustainable accommodation for Simon service users, will also help to reinforce Gardaí objectives. Some of those who avail of the services offered by the Simon Communities around the country are also problematic drug and alcohol users¹. In addition, a number have also been convicted of crimes and come to Simon services directly from prison. It is our experience that the security and stability of having an appropriate place to call home can also have a positive impact in relation to these issues. Indeed there is strong evidence that securing stable accommodation is a preventative factor in terms of re-offending behaviours.

It is therefore important that the Corporate Strategy commitments to engage with community stakeholders includes those experiencing and at risk of homelessness and homeless service providers. Approaches could be adopted that could include, for example, consultation with a service provider when a warrant is being issued with regard to a client of that service. This might enable appropriate arrangements to be put in place so that a search can be undertaken with the minimum disruption and maximum understanding for other residents. In turn we would hope to help the Gardaí whenever possible and to liaise in relation to issues arising amongst users of Simon services which may represent a risk to public safety.

It is our desire to see all our service users successfully integrate into their local communities and to move into appropriate independent or long term supported accommodation. Unfortunately there is often a stigma associated with being homeless and there can be resistance from the local community making it difficult to secure accommodation to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness within certain areas. We believe that An Garda Síochána, via their community policing function, can make a positive contribution in this regard. This can be achieved by working together in partnership with our Communities and other service providers to ensure that successful integration can be facilitated in the locations. This might be done by keeping local residents fully informed of plans, introducing Community Gardaí to prospective tenants and keeping them informed about any relevant issues (e.g. drug and alcohol use, mental health issues, etc.).

¹ A problem drug user is "any person who experiences social, psychological, physical or legal problems related to intoxication and/or regular excessive consumption and dependence, as a consequence of his or her use of drugs or other chemical substances" Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (1982) Report of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. The Stationery Office. London.

4. Garda Vetting Unit

One excellent development progressed by An Garda Síochána recently that should continue to be an important focus in the forthcoming policing period is the establishment of the Garda Vetting Unit. The previous system of an individual seeking Garda clearance on their own behalf was unsatisfactory from both a Gardaí and homeless service provider perspective and the new system means we can now employ new staff with a much greater degree of confidence. It was very encouraging to see An Garda Síochána respond to the concerns of community and voluntary organisations such as Simon by developing a more comprehensive system.

It is also beneficial that An Garda Síochána has now agreed to undertake Garda vetting on behalf of all potential volunteers as well as paid staff. The added value brought by volunteers to the Simon Communities through their skills, expertise and commitment is immeasurable. However we work with very vulnerable people on the margins of society and hence it is of utmost importance that all of our staff, whether paid or volunteering, are of an appropriate character to provide the support required. Hence the important information provided by the unit about previous serious convictions and circumstances surrounding those convictions is of great benefit to all our Communities. It is our policy throughout the Simon Communities that each individual applicant for employment or volunteering is processed by the Garda Vetting Unit and this commitment will continue as long as the service is available.

Conclusion

Overall there is much to be gained by An Garda Síochána from pursuing appropriate interventions in relation to homelessness within future Corporate Strategy and Policing Plans. There has been progress made in recent years with Gardaí becoming more community-focused and taking account of the needs and circumstances of the most marginalised groups in society, and this must continue. In particular, we would also like to see explicit commitments within the Corporate Strategy 2010-2012 to facilitate future policing plans and planning documents to:

- Work towards safer public places with a closer understanding of the issues of homelessness and the needs of people experiencing homelessness in this regard.
- Engage more effectively with people experiencing homelessness to ensure that they receive the same protection from Gardaí as any other members of society and are encouraged to report any crime committed against them.
- Build good working partnerships with homeless service providers to realise mutual benefits of reducing crime, building confidence in Gardaí and assisting in the progression of people experiencing homelessness into appropriate, stable, secure long term accommodation.
- Continue the excellent work of the Garda Vetting Unit in ensuring that homeless service providers can employ both paid staff and volunteers with the confidence of appropriate background checks having been made.