



TACKLING RURAL CRIME

A SÍNN FÉIN POLICY PAPER ON MEETING
THE POLICING NEEDS OF RURAL IRELAND



INTRODUCTION

People deserve to feel safe in their communities. Unfortunately, in recent times, due to a reduction in Garda visibility and increases in certain types of crime, many do not.

People feel concerned and, in rural areas, many feel isolated and vulnerable.

That is an indictment of Government policy where it comes to tackling crime in rural areas.

Rural communities across the country have felt the impact of cutbacks in policing. Cutbacks in Garda numbers, Garda stations, and resources mean families and the elderly feel isolated and in danger

That is despite the fact that ordinary Gardaí on the ground are doing their utmost, but are hampered by a lack of numbers and resources.

We need a Government that is serious about tackling crime in rural areas and urban areas.

This document outlines Sinn Féin's vision for how we tackle the increase in Rural Crime, and ensure that people can feel safe in communities the length and breadth of the country.

TACKLING CRIME IN RURAL AREAS

Rural crime is not recorded separately on Garda IT systems; the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice & Equality report on rural crimes identified that this needs to be addressed.

However, it is our experience that communities feel less safe and that there is a widespread concern over an increase in crime in rural areas.

There have been some horrific and violent attacks in recent years. For many people, these attacks have left psychological scars in the communities where they happened. People in many communities remain deeply concerned about their safety in their own homes. This issue has yet to be addressed.

Many of these crimes relate to theft, through robbery and burglary, with the incidence of robbery up 22% on 2017 in most recent figures, combined with significant increases in burglary across large parts of the country.

We would also note that theft of Farm Equipment has risen by 40% in recent times.

According to the Agricultural Crime in Ireland report, published by Kathleen Moore Walsh and Louise Walsh of WIT, the majority of respondents (565 of 861) said they have experienced agricultural crime, and the average loss to a farmer who did experience crime was €4,328. As stated by Ciarán Crowley at the University of Lille, 45% of respondents had not reported these to the Gardaí.

In December 2018, the Farmers Journal reported some 862 incidents of trespass on farms and land that year.

The increase in Rural Crime is a trend reflected in other countries, reflects changes among other things in technology being used by Criminals and requires a specific response. According to the National Farmers Union of Cymru, the cost of rural crime in Britain reached £42.5m in 2015. Criminals have begun to use sophisticated ways of targeting rural homes and farms, such as GPS systems and drones. In Britain, two tractors stolen in Scotland, worth £96,000, were recovered in Lithuania, and nine other tractors being found in Northern Cyprus.

This is not a rural issue alone. Theft is affecting businesses in our villages, towns, and cities also.

We know that almost €8 million worth of equipment and tools were stolen from construction sites in Ireland in a ten-month period last year.

In 2017, there were 4,562 reported incidents between January and October, with the theft of tools and equipment from vans and cars making up 43% of all such construction-related crime.

More than 14,000 bicycles, worth an estimated €2 million, have been stolen since 2016, 83% of which were stolen in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, and Galway.

We also know that many stolen goods are stolen for resale, particularly expensive equipment, but it can be difficult for An Garda Síochána to identify and seize suspected stolen goods if they cannot identify that they have been stolen, even where they believe that to be the case.

Many of these crimes of theft and burglary have been aggravated and carried out by people who are on Bail and in breach of Bail conditions.

Last year, there were 16,380 burglaries and 70,000 theft related offences. Vehicle theft has increased to 4,737 in 2018, up 3.1% on 4,594 in 2017.

Last year also saw significant increases in robberies (11.3%) and sexual offences (10.3%).

SINN FÉIN PROPOSALS

GARDA VISIBILITY

All the evidence shows that it is undoubtedly the case that visible policing is the best deterrent to crime.

We know that there has been significant reduction in Garda visibility over recent years. Most Garda stations are still at or below 2010 levels; they are running to stand still. That is why so many stations are reliant on overtime.

In 2009, there was an available strength of 14,547 Gardaí. Now, there are 14,160, despite a growing population. This is exacerbated by increasing specialisation within divisions, meaning that units attached to stations are often diminished compared to their 2009 levels.

Two out of every three Garda stations are only at or even below the staffing level they had in 2014, the time when the Garda Síochána College, Templemore, closed by Fianna Fáil, was reopened.

According to figures published recently in the Times Ireland, since September 2014, staffing levels increased in just 170 stations out of 560, 30% of the total.

Of the remaining 70%, 242 stations are at the same level, while 149 have had staffing levels reduced. Many of these are rural and more isolated stations, with the increases generally occurring in divisional and district headquarters.

The figures endorse what communities all over the country are saying; we do not have enough Gardaí out on the street. Most stations are running to stand still, and many are down numbers. The increasing demands of specialised units in divisions, while important in themselves, have meant that Gardaí who patrol and prevent crime in communities are being lost to these units, and are often not replaced.

The South has one of the lowest police-to-population ratios in Europe with 278 Gardaí per 100,000 citizens, 40 less than the EU average. Eurostat found that the average across the 28 EU member states was 318 police officers to 100,000 inhabitants.

In Cyprus, for example, there are 573 police officers per 100,000; in Scotland, there are 322.

We need to have more Gardaí on patrol in rural areas and better opening hours in Garda stations. The Garda Commissioner should open a fresh process inviting Garda Districts to submit expressions of interest for additional stations to be opened or reopened, with decisions to be based on merit; factors would include strategic location and demographics, to name but two examples.

The decision to have just 600 Gardaí, instead of the full complement of 800, graduate from Templemore this year is a decision we fundamentally disagree with. We need to increase the number of sworn members of an Garda Síochána up and beyond 16,000 as soon as possible. This should then be considered the baseline.

Furthermore, we need these Gardaí on the beat on the street and on country roads. We need to minimise the time that Gardaí spend behind their desks by advancing civilianisation, a process that has been far too slow.

We also call on the Government to implement the Commission on the Future of Policing recommendations on freeing up Gardaí as much as possible from responsibilities that can be done by other public servants such as appearing in Court, prisoner transport, and immigration related work; all of which would serve to free up Gardaí for the frontline, solving and preventing crime.

We also have the farcical situation that up to 50% of all frontline Gardaí, according to the GRA, do not have the adequate training and clearance to pursue cars at high speed. This is a significant problem given that many stations cover vast rural areas and, if the Gardaí cannot pursue criminals at speed, this seriously hampers their ability to tackle crime.

LOCAL PARTICIPATION IN POLICING

Since 2008, Joint Policing Committees have been rolled out across the state to Local Authority areas, the City and County Councils.

The main responsibilities of JPCs are as follows:

- To monitor the levels and patterns of crime, disorder, and anti-social behaviour (including misuse of alcohol and drugs), particularly at District and Divisional Levels
- Advise the local authority and Gardaí on how they might best perform their functions.
- Arrange and host public meetings (at least one per annum, though in practice, generally only one per annum)
- Establish local policing fora in specific neighbourhoods where necessary and co-ordinate the activities of those fora.
- Assist Divisional and District Garda Officers with the formulation and operation of annual policing plans.

In reality, these forums are relatively ineffectual and are often simply a run through of up to date local crime statistics, and an opportunity for elected representatives, as well as some community organisations, to query and seek further information. It is not generally a collaboration between the Gardaí and the Community as to how policing should be managed, resourced, and planned in the area.

In practice, the Local Policing Fora, organised at neighbourhood level, often have more value, giving local communities some scope to discuss particular incidences of crime or trends and what can be done.

However, as these fora operate at a sub-district level generally, it is not suited to more strategic discussions, around visibility and resourcing, policies and so on. For that, a more powerful JPC system is required.

In addition, with both the JPC and Local Policing Fora, notification of the public of these events can be limited and public knowledge of these structures is very low.

There are considerable differences with the system in the north; where the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSP) have greater powers. Gardaí are not answerable to the JPCs in the same manner as the PSNI is to the PCSP, and very often solely reports on information rather than being called to action by the JPC.

While it is not suggested to replicate the PCSP system, which itself has its flaws and has scope for improvement, there is clearly greater powers and responsibilities with the PCSP system, which the JPC system does not have, particularly in relation to accountability, outlined in some of the strategic objectives as follows:

- Putting in place implementation structures and delivery mechanisms and facilitating resident focused participatory community safety structures that will contribute to a reduction in crime and the enhancement of policing and community safety in the Partnership's area, directly through the collaborative working of the membership of the Partnership, through the work of its delivery groups or through working in partnership with, or supporting the work of, others
- Increasing PCSP awareness with the public and key stakeholders by planning communications activity to more proactively inform and promote the work of the PCSPs.
- Working in partnership with designated partners, local statutory bodies/agencies, the voluntary sector and the community to deal with, and reduce the impact of, actual and perceived anti-social behaviour and crime in the community
- Contributing to delivery of the Community Safety Strategy action plans, and initiatives that improve community safety
- Ensuring local accountability through the Policing Committee's role in monitoring police performance
- Ensuring that policing delivery reflects the involvement, views and priorities of local communities
- The inclusion of initiatives/projects in PCSP plans aimed directly at meeting the objectives of the NI Policing Plan
- Supporting effective engagement with the police and the local community, with specific emphasis on engagement with children, young people, and marginalised communities.

The JPCs are also under-resourced, with limited funding and generally staffed by already overstretched Local Authority Staff. Consideration should be given to how the JPCs can operate in cooperation with both Gardaí and Local Authorities, while being relatively independent of both.

A direct link between the Policing Authority and JPCs is worthy of consideration.

We would propose that the Government legislate to reform the JPCs to ensure they have greater powers, functions, and resources.

We also believe that public meetings should be held every couple of months, and JPCs should have an outreach programme to increase and diversify participation.

JPCs should be more central to the development of annual local, divisional, and district Policing Plans, as well as multi-annual strategies.

In addition, under the Rapid Programme for disadvantaged communities, the designated communities were often assigned Community Wardens. This practice has been continued through Local Authorities own resources in some areas. While Community Wardens, of course, cannot intervene directly to contain such behaviour, part of their role would be to help the Gardaí and other agencies by reporting any incidents of which they may become aware of and liaising between them. This can be an important role in planning safer communities. We believe that this should be rolled out to Rural Communities also.

POLICING PARTICIPATION IN RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

‘Restorative Justice’ is an approach to responding to criminal and other harmful behaviour that enables the perpetrator of a criminal or other harmful act to offer restitution to the victim and/or the victim’s community. It identifies crime, or ‘anti-social behaviour’, as an act against an individual or community rather than against the State.

We believe that there is a role for ‘restorative justice’ in the justice system and that, in appropriate cases, it can be more socially effective than ‘retributive justice’, resulting in higher victim satisfaction, lower instances of repeat offending, and greater chances of offender rehabilitation and reintegration into their community.

This would be an approach which would be complementary to, and not a substitute for, civic policing and should only be used with the free and voluntary consent of the parties, with proper protocols established between restorative justice projects and the criminal justice system.

INVESTING IN NEWER TECHNOLOGIES

An Garda Síochána has not adequately kept pace with advances in crime fighting technology, leaving ordinary Gardaí at a loss. Some of these technologies are cost effective and can be provided easily.

We believe there is a need for Satellite Navigation for all Garda vehicles, providing for quicker response times; to provide all frontline Gardaí with body cameras, increasing safety for both the public and Gardaí; the installation of cameras in each car, again with the purpose of protecting both Gardaí and citizens; and the allocation of a secure, encoded USB stick to every Garda in the force for usage by individual Gardaí when compiling evidence.

We also support the implementation of the Commission on the Future of Policing report which calls for the Gardaí to have a “comprehensive strategy for upgrading its digital information systems, based on a full assessment of the information it requires both to deliver a high quality policing service and to run a large organisation efficiently. A Digital Policing Innovation Centre, supported by Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland, would enable An Garda Síochána and Ireland as a whole to contribute to technological innovation in policing.”

311 out of 564 operational Garda stations, largely in rural areas, are currently without Broadband. The lack of dependable, high-speed internet access means the digital PULSE information system cannot

be used in these stations, despite its very important role in the day-to-day operations of An Garda Síochána. This is nothing short of scandalous, and something which must be addressed immediately.

INVESTING IN COMMUNITY GARDÁI

Community Gardáí are invaluable in developing trust and relationships with the local community and in improving the local knowledge of the Gardáí of the community they operate in.

Community policing, where properly resourced, works. Crime prevention is better than crime solving and a clued-in Community Garda plays a major role in that.

Sinn Féin welcomes the evident support for the Community Policing Model in the Commission on the Future of Policing. The National Model of Community Policing was launched in 2009. However, Community policing has never been properly resourced or supported.

The number of designated community Gardáí in many areas has decreased by 36% from 1,112 in 2011 to 714 in 2019. This has seriously reduced their ability to proactively develop relationships and to take initiatives, and all too often, they are Community Gardáí in name only.

This needs to be brought back up to 2010 levels, at the bare minimum. This requires additional Gardáí within districts to replace Gardáí promoted to designated community Gardáí positions and that all positions left vacant are backfilled, so that core units can be kept at an appropriate operational strength.

RURAL CRIME TASK FORCES AND ALL-IRELAND CO-OPERATION

Crime in rural areas, due to dispersed resources, can be challenging to investigate, solve, and prevent. We need more resources, but we also need better use of these resources and communication with other agencies.

We support the idea of forming Rural Crime Task Forces in all rural Garda Divisions to ensure resources are adequately focussed on the problems affecting those areas and targeting the gangs and individuals that are widely known to be involved in crime and anti-social behaviour. These could convene on a statewide basis periodically to share expertise and identify growing trends in rural crimes.

Such task forces would cooperate and liaise with other key public bodies such as the County Councils, community organisations, such as Muintir na Tíre, or farming organisations to provide training and crime prevention initiatives, allow a focused approach to criminal gangs operating in rural communities, and to improve Garda Visibility.

The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice recently heard from the PSNI on their use of social media as a way of increasing visibility and maintaining engagement with communities and we would support exploring this; a rural crime task force could be a useful platform for doing so. This system of communication could later be explored on an All-Ireland basis.

It is essential that, in the context of Brexit, cross-border initiatives to tackle crime are stepped up. Undoubtedly, it is already the case that some criminals are active on both sides of the border, having a serious detrimental impact on border communities. Much rural crime takes place on a cross-border basis and requires a strategic, collaborative response from key stakeholders, not least policing services.

There is now a greater than ever need for greater interagency, cross-border cooperation between An Garda Síochána, the PSNI, and other key organisations such as Local Authorities and the Departments of Agriculture.

This is clearly an approach which is needed for tackling the recent, ongoing issue of attacks on ATM machines, which have been a significant feature in late 2018 and early 2019, with attacks in counties Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Derry, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone, Meath, and Monaghan.

Evidently, there is a need for sharing of intelligence and cooperation with regard to these gangs, which are quite sophisticated.

COMMUNITY CCTV SCHEME

CCTV has the capacity to play a beneficial role in assisting Gardaí solve and discourage crime. However, the roll-out of Community CCTV schemes have been bogged down by factors such as start- up costs for local communities, the complexity of the process, and the inability of Gardaí and local authorities to agree on who is responsible for the data collected.

Sinn Féin supports increasing the funding for the Community CCTV scheme and a simpler application process for Local Community & Local Authorities. We will bring forward legislation to clarify who is responsible for administration and data management in any such schemes.

TAISCEADÁN - NATIONAL PROPERTY REGISTER

Theft of Farm Equipment has risen by 40% in recent times and almost €8 million worth of equipment and tools were stolen from construction sites in Ireland in a ten-month period last year.

People's livelihoods are threatened by such actions, and it is affecting both rural and urban Communities.

Very often, the goods are stolen for resale, particularly in relation to expensive equipment. However, it can be difficult for An Garda Síochána to identify and seize suspected stolen goods if they cannot identify that they have been stolen, even where they believe that to be the case.

We are proposing 'Taisceadán – the National Property Register', which would be a centralised system accessible to, and managed by, An Garda Síochána, which would catalogue property with a specific identification number for expensive items such as trade tools, bicycles, and farm machinery.

This will provide a deterrent to theft by making resale of such property much harder, as well as investigation of the theft more efficient and making the return of the property to the owner much easier.

Many tradespeople have reported significant theft. Many of the tools they would use are quite expensive. If they were to be stolen and then recovered, many would appreciate those tools being returned to them. However, identifying stolen tools can be very challenging, and tradespeople could often have several thousands of euro of expensive equipment in their vans.

This also affects cyclists; according to figures released in September 2018, more than 14,000 bikes worth an estimated €2m have been stolen since 2016, with 83% stolen in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, and Galway.

The figures from the Garda Analysis Services show that almost 5,700 bikes were stolen in 2016; the figure rose by 7.5% to 6,109 in 2017 and was already at 2,319 by the end of June.

Many Garda stations have large storage units full of recovered equipment, but, due to a lack of a register, they are unable to return what are some very valuable pieces of equipment to their original owners.

According to IFA crime prevention officer Barry Carey, at a Garda property recovery day recently held in Nenagh, “99%” of the stolen goods couldn’t be returned to their owners because they didn’t have unique markings. He said that nearly all perpetrators caught in possession of them couldn’t be prosecuted.

“There were 500 items: ride-on mowers and trailers and all sorts of power tools. It was extraordinary.”

Our proposal is based on the British National Mobile Property Register.

Their own property register is most commonly used to search in the following categories; Mobile phones, Tablets / iPads, Bicycles, Games consoles, Watches / Jewellery, Computers / Laptops, Cameras, Luggage, Keys, Power tools, Antiques/collectable items, and TV/Hi-Fi/Home entertainment equipment.

The NMPR is connected to the Police National Computer and is used by 100% of districts. Taking London as an example, there are roughly 40,000 searches of the database made by police monthly, with about 20% of searches returning an item match.

Items can be marked using either stencils, or preferably, using a ‘Telesis device’ which uses laser technology to mark items, with the owner’s Eircode. This is provided by ‘Property Marking’, a not for profit based in Tipperary. We believe that all Garda Divisions should have access to this technology, which can be provided to the Community for marking.

This can also be integrated with the CESAR marking system, which can be used to trace stolen equipment across Europe through the use of police-held scanners.

It will also require a significant publicity campaign, to ensure better public awareness of Taisceadán.

INVESTMENT IN GARDA YOUTH DIVERSION PROGRAMMES & IMPROVE REFERRALS PROCESS

The Garda Youth Diversion Programme is a very valuable and effective programme, which has a proven track record in ensuring that young people at risk of engaging in crime are steered away from it.

However, it is underfunded and many communities do not benefit from it. We believe the scheme should be expanded by 10 projects in a year, and have provided as much in our alternative budget.

However, the Garda PULSE system needs to be entirely overhauled, as failures have emerged in relation to the referring, or non-referring, of young people to the programme. Earlier this year, it was revealed that 7,894 reported crimes by more than 3,500 children and young people were not progressed, because they were deemed unsuitable for the Garda Youth Diversion Programme.

This resulted in some serious crimes being committed where they could and should have intervened at a much earlier stage.

The review shows that roughly 75% of crimes not appropriately progressed fell into four crime categories; public order, theft, traffic, and criminal damage, in addition to a total of 55 serious offences identified, including one rape & one sexual assault.

Where young people are deemed unsuitable for the programme, the Gardaí need to ensure that they do not simply fall through the cracks; that is an injustice to the victims of crime.

We need additional resources for early intervention and crime preventions schemes, such as the Garda Youth Diversion Programme and Juvenile Liaison officers.

SENTENCING GUIDELINES

Weak sentences add further injury to the victims of crime.

As a result, many people and organisations such as the Rape Crisis Centre, the Irish Penal Reform Trust and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties have called for sentencing guidelines for judges.

Everybody agrees that the severity of a sentence must match the severity of the crime. Currently, there are too many instances where this is not happening.

High Court Judge Úna Ní Raifeartaigh has described the lack of sentencing guidelines as “somewhat bizarre” given the sensitivity of the area saying, “one judge’s substantial could be four years and another’s could be 14 years”.

Sinn Féin has made this issue a priority. We believe the public deserves to know that offenders will receive a sentence that fits the crime and that heinous crimes will be met with stiff sentences. They deserve to know that there is a basis for calculating a sentence.

We negotiated with the Government to pass amendments to the Judicial Council Bill for Sentencing Guidelines.

When these amendments are passed, it will be a significant step towards a better, fairer system of sentencing and justice for victims of crime.

We simply cannot continue with a system that fails victims of crime so badly.

SUMMONSES & BAIL

A December 2017 Primetime investigates Programme showed a Courts System in chaos and in need of reform. It illustrates a state of chaos particularly at District Court Level.

The chaos and the failures come from many directions. However, one of the primary issues that emerged was poor management of the summons system by Gardaí, with many cases not progressing due to summons not being served.

The Gardaí need to significantly improve the issuing of summons; there are still far too many cases which are struck out for this reason. This means people guilty of crimes are getting a reprieve due to a system that is clearly poorly administered and much in need of an overhaul.

Time and time again, we have seen crimes committed by people who are out on Bail, who have had bail conditions attached to them, but that these Bail conditions are not properly enforced. In numerous high profile cases, suspects were found to have breached bail conditions on numerous occasions

without consequence. Bail conditions need to be properly enforced; the Gardaí need to allocate the resources required for the monitoring and enforcement of Bail conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recruit 800 Gardaí per annum to gradually increase the force above 16,000
- A fresh process inviting Garda Districts to submit expressions of interest for additional stations to be opened or reopened, with decisions to be based on merit
- Speed up Civilianisation by recruiting 550 Civilian Staff per annum, free up Gardaí from office work not essential to be carried out by Gardaí, and get them out on the street and on patrol
- As part of a comprehensive training Strategy for the Gardaí, ensure more Gardaí are fully trained to give chase at speed & internal evaluation teams should evaluate the application of training
- Implement Taisceadán – the National Property Register
- Form Rural Crime Task Forces in all rural Garda Divisions
- Reform JPCs to give them more powers and give local Communities more influence on policing
- Community Wardens for County Councils, to assist with planning safer communities
- Put in place restorative justice schemes complementary to, and not a substitute for, civic policing
- Ensure all Rural Garda Stations have access to broadband
- Implement Commission on Future of Policing recommendations on technology and provide Gardaí with the tools to tackle crime in rural and remote areas
- Bring Community Gardaí back up to 2010 levels
- Increase the funding for the Community CCTV scheme, a simpler application process for local communities & Local Authorities, all accompanied by legislation to clarify who is responsible for administration and data management in any such schemes
- Overhaul of the Bail system to ensure it is properly enforced
- Better administration of the system of issuing of summons
- More investment in the Garda Youth Diversion Programme, Juvenile Liaison officers, and overhaul PULSE system to ensure no one is missed by the system

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