



Submission by  
the Simon Communities of Ireland to the  
the Garda Síochána Policing Plan 2008

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## 1. Introduction

The Simon Communities of Ireland is a national organisation representing Simon Communities in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the South East and the North West. We have been working with people experiencing homelessness since 1969. Simon work with approximately 2,000 people per year. Collectively we have 300 staff and 800 volunteers, of whom approximately 40 volunteer in a full time capacity.

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 and enables them to acquire and sustain an appropriate home of their own.

Simon, 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 detox 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.

## 2. The Garda Síochána Policing Plan 2008

The Simon Communities of Ireland welcome the opportunity to make a submission with regard to the development of the Garda Síochána Policing Plan 2008. 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 Gardai 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 Gardai have in recent years demonstrated a much greater focus on engaging with and serving the entire community, including the most marginalized groups in society. The launch of '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 Garda Síochána Policing Plan 2007 was consistent with the values, strategic goals and initiatives identified within the Corporate Strategy. However it was disappointing that there was little development in terms of detailing specific actions that were going to be delivered throughout the year. In the new Policing Plan for 2008, Simon Communities of Ireland would like to see the proposed actions further articulated, with clear processes in place and lines of responsibility for delivery. In this regard, there are 4 key aspects of Gardai 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:

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

## 2. Safer Public Places

The desired outcome under the public order strategic goal of the Corporate Strategy of 'safer public places' is one with which the Simon Communities of Ireland would concur. It is however essential that Gardai 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 Gardai. 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 citizens. 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 citizens, often have nowhere else to go, and it is important that the Gardai develops an understanding of their situation and their need for a safe place that is free from the threat of violence.

To date, Gardai 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 with regard to our service users that may result in anti-social behaviour occasionally in public spaces. Where such instances occur, they should be dealt with by Gardai with the situation of the individual in mind. Gardai should also 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 problems of anti-social behaviour are not repeated.

Within the Policing Plan 2008, we would encourage the development of a protocol for Gardai dealing with issues related to homelessness in public places that takes account of the factors noted above.

### 3. 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 citizen. The majority of crimes against people who are homeless go unreported. This is often a result of a lack of trust in Gardai and a feeling that any complaints will not be taken seriously because of their situation. Many will have had negative previous experiences in this regard that discourages them from approaching Gardai.

An Garda Síochána have demonstrated that they are serious about engaging with the most marginalized groups of society, and the commitment to meeting the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse communities is a central goal of its Corporate Plan. The work of the Gardai in engaging with the RAPID programme to target those most at risk of social exclusion is a further commendable initiative. There is a need however to build on such activities and focus action on improving services for people experiencing 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 Gardai. 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 Gardai 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 would therefore recommend that within the Garda Síochána Policing Plan 2008 there is commitment to engage to a greater extent with people experiencing homelessness in recognition of the problems they face in relation to crime. There is potential to develop greater understanding throughout the Gardai 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 Gardai to help them understand homelessness and signpost people to appropriate services and including the subject of homelessness within An Garda Síochána training programmes.

#### 4. Good Working Partnerships with Homeless Services

Many of our services have developed good working relationships with local Gardai and we feel it is essential to maintain and build upon these relationships in the future. We would 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 clients, will help to reinforce Gardai objectives to reduce crime. Many of our service users have (or have had) drug or alcohol dependencies and a number are from an ex-offending background and by helping them to overcome the particular issues that resulted in homelessness, this also reduces the risk of crime as a result of these problems. Indeed there is strong evidence that securing stable accommodation prevents re-offending from those that have been in prison.

It is therefore important that the Corporate Strategy commitment to engage with community stakeholders includes 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 an appropriate time to be arranged and 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 Gardai whenever possible and inform them of any issues among our clients or ex-clients that may represent a risk to public safety.

It is our desire to see all our clients successfully integrate within their local communities and sustain themselves in long-term accommodation, but unfortunately there is often a stigma held against people experiencing homelessness. Nimbyism (not-in-my-backyard) is often apparent with 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 in which our clients become resident. This might be done by keeping local residents fully informed of plans, introducing Community Gardai to prospective tenants and keeping them informed about any relevant issues (e.g drug addiction, alcoholism, mental illness, etc.).

Within the Policing Plan 2008, the Simon Communities of Ireland would like to see protocols introduced for liaising with homeless service providers in order to address the issues discussed above in a constructive manner.

## 5. 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 Gardai 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 Simon Communities of Ireland rely heavily on voluntary support in order to deliver its services. 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 convictions and circumstances surrounding those convictions is of great benefit to all our Communities. It is policy throughout the Simon Communities of Ireland that each individual applicant for employment is processed by the Garda Vetting Unit and this commitment will continue as long as the service is available.

## 6. Conclusion

Overall there is much to be gained by An Garda Síochána from pursuing appropriate interventions in relation to homelessness within their future Policing Plans. We believe that there has been good progress made in recent years by Gardai in becoming more community-focused and taking account of the needs and circumstances of the most marginalized groups in society, and this must continue. In particular, we would also like to see explicit commitments within the 2008 Policing Plan and future 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 Gardai as any other citizen 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 Gardai and assisting in the progression of people experiencing homelessness into stable, secure permanent 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.

If these actions can be progressed and developed we believe that they would generate a more effective Garda service for people experiencing homelessness moving forward.