



The establishment of the Policing Community Safety Authority (PCSA), as a result of the Policing Security and Community Safety Act 2024, has the potential to bring about independent and transparent oversight of policing in Ireland

The Garda Representative Association had advocated for the establishment of an independent policing authority for many

years prior to the establishment of the previous Policing Authority in 2016. Policing oversight had become somewhat overcrowded in recent years with a confusing array of functions distributed amongst different statutory bodies with sometimes bewildering, if not competing, roles.

As members of An Garda Síochána get on with the daily challenges of providing a policing service, grappling with increasing demands, complex social issues and crippling personnel shortages in some areas, they could be forgiven for not even noticing the changes that are taking place. The impact to date of collective oversight has been a mixed bag, with both positive and negative impacts on the workplace of the people who actually do the heavy lifting at the coalface of policing modern Ireland.

The Garda Inspectorate was perhaps the first time in the history of the organisation that frontline gardaí felt listened to. Site visits to stations and the live policing environment heavily influenced reports that issued. The operational policing experience of members of the inspectorate was clearly evident in the tone and content of reports that were issued. Public commentary highlighting inadequacies in training and equipment gave the newly formed body credibility with gardaí giving confidence that things would change for the better.

Early improvements such as the replacement of antiquated wooden truncheons with expandable batons and the personal issue of body armour to all

frontline gardaí were welcomed and seen as an indication that we were moving into a modern era of policing. Further reports identified imbalances in the allocation of resources, critical shortfalls in information technology and a culture of blame within the organisation. Unfortunately many of the reports that resonated with the experience of those working within the organisation were not acted upon and much of the change members yearned for did not materialise.

The establishment of an independent Policing Authority in 2016 was welcomed by the Garda Representative Association and the members it represents. The prospect of removing key functions, including promotion to the senior ranks, from direct political control was seen as a very important step towards a more transparent independent and accountable management structure. Changes to the promotion structures within the organisation have on the whole been welcomed and access to those opportunities are perceived as fairer and more transparent.

Where the previous Policing Authority failed to capitalise on its potential to be a catalyst for real change and genuine transparency was in its public interactions with senior leaders within An Garda Síochána. While the qualifications, experience and expertise of individual members of the authority brought a wealth of different perspectives to the conversation, that conversation all too often became academic and theoretical, tending to be aloof from the reality that is the gritty and unsavoury elements of societal problems that police officers encounter in the daily grind of law enforcement.

Unfortunately the perception of many gardaí, whether real or not, was that the

Authority became a talking shop rather than an effective oversight body holding senior leaders to account for organisational focus, policy and delivery of key performance indicators. Anyone taking time to observe public meetings will have observed well-prepared and scripted answers to questions delivered by senior managers that portray a very sanitised and subjective representation of circumstances that would often not correlate with the experience of members dealing with the very topic or issue being discussed. Too often real and pressing problems surrounding organisational problems have been glossed over with jargon-filled corporate language and a barrage of out of context statistics when a few simple probing questions answered with clarity was what was required.

Recent comments by the chair of PCSA do suggest a willingness to listen to the challenges facing gardaí and a willingness to acknowledge problems with the manner in which Garda Management responds to challenges. Change fatigue has also been acknowledged as a very real issue within the organisation. The challenge for the PCSA in building credible and effective oversight going forward is to ensure the good work of the Garda Inspectorate is continued and built upon while ensuring that the impact of change is independently assessed and examined.

There is an opportunity to build the effective, independent, credible oversight of policing in Ireland that never materialised under the previous Policing Authority.