



THE NATIONAL MODEL OF COMMUNITY POLICING

**Submission by Pavee Point
Travellers' Centre**

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Pavee Point

Pavee Point welcomes the development of a new National Model of Community Policing and the opportunity to contribute towards this.

Pavee Point is a voluntary non-governmental organisation committed to the attainment of human rights for Irish Travellers. The group is comprised of Travellers and members of the majority population working in partnership to address Travellers' social and economic exclusion.

The key values which underpin Pavee Point's work include: human rights, equality, social solidarity, cultural diversity, community development, partnership and recognition that issues facing Travellers are multi-dimensional and so require holistic responses to address them.

Pavee Point works at local, national and international levels, using the experiences and learning arising within them to inform and develop approaches to address Travellers' socio-economic and cultural exclusion and non-observance of their human rights.

Garda-Traveller relationships

There is a history of generally poor relations between Guards and the Traveller community characterized by mistrust and hostility on both sides. Many Travellers feel that their community is over-policed and under-protected and that it is policed at the behest of the settled community.

Garda Superintendent Frank O'Brien gives an example of over policing in his 2002 dissertation on 'Ethnicity, Ritual and Policing Strategy – A Study of the Relationship between An Garda Síochána and the Traveller Community'.

“Over policing during funerals has been identified by Garda and Traveller representatives as contributing to the poor relationship that exists between the Gardaí and the Traveller community. Over policing is viewed as being disrespectful to the deceased and it is considered that the setting up of checkpoints to enforce traffic legislation and carry out searches is inappropriate. This type of policing activity is not carried out during similar events in the settled community and if it were, it would certainly be considered inappropriate and insensitive.”

There is a strong perception amongst Travellers that they are generally not afforded the same level of protection by the Gardaí as the settled community. This arises, for example, where Travellers are victims of discrimination or crime and violence committed by settled people and by other Travellers. In some cases where violent conflict has occurred within the Traveller community, Travellers have described instances where the Guards have failed to respond to emergency calls for assistance or have stood back and allowed, or in some cases allegedly encouraged, people to take the law into their own hands. It suits some Travellers for the Guards to adopt a 'hands off' approach in this context. However, there are other Travellers for whom this is not helpful, but they often feel that they cannot articulate their need for Garda protection publicly.

According to Mulcahy and O'Mahony in 'Policing and Social Marginalisation', the perception that Travellers are policed at the behest of the settled community relates primarily

to access to social venues and the location, or very existence, of Traveller encampments. In the words of one Traveller respondent,

“It’s either the guards coming to evict you or the guards coming to remove you out of the pub or premises or a shop, or wherever it would be. And it’s always in relation to discrimination or racism, in most cases, that Travellers have contact with the guards”.

Perceptions of over policing and under protection and of Guards responding disproportionately in favour of the needs of the settled community versus the needs of the Traveller community impact negatively on relationships between the Traveller and settled communities, within the Traveller community and between Travellers and the Gardaí themselves.

Valuing community policing

Community policing “stresses policing *with* and *for* the community rather than policing *of* the community” (Tilley, 2003, pg.315 quoted in Ellis’s dissertation on ‘Community Oriented Policing with the Traveller Community’). It aims to improve the quality of life of communities by adopting problem solving approaches together with communities.

Pavee Point has met with the Garda Commissioner and requested that greater resources be put into community policing initiatives with the Traveller community. Efforts put in to improving the nature of the relationship between Travellers and Guards should contribute to improved confidence and communication between both groups and enable them to work together more effectively.

Ellis in her thesis on ‘Community Oriented Policing within the Traveller Community’ notes that it is often where police / community partnerships are most needed that successful partnerships are hardest to create. This implies that trust building is crucially important. Understanding how communities have come to mistrust the police and how trust can be regained are important factors when developing new community policing strategies. It suggests the need for commitment, leadership and perseverance in building relationships. Ellis also points out that community policing is often undervalued within police organizations and does not offer the same opportunities for advancement. With these points in mind, Pavee Point supports the proposals of the Lord Mayor’s Commission on Crime and Policing for:

- the appointment of an Assistant Commissioner responsible for driving the ethos and practice of community policing within An Garda Síochána; and
- the selection of gardaí to work as community police officers for a minimum period of two years in the same area with the possibility of promotion whilst remaining in community policing.

It is important that community policing is not an isolated function, but that other Garda strategies are informed by and supportive of a community policing approach.

Finglas Case Study

The benefits of investing in community oriented policing can be seen in the Dublin suburb of Finglas where both An Garda Síochána and Pavee Point have made efforts to improve relationships between Travellers and Guards. These had been particularly strained following the erection of a barrier in Dunsink Lane in October 2004 and ensuing protests. Shortly after

this, the newly arrived Inspector accepted an invitation from Pavee Point to a meeting, the aim of which was to encourage more Travellers to engage in the Finglas Community Safety Forum. The Inspector gave his mobile number to Travellers at the meeting and undertook to monitor response times to calls which Travellers said were unsatisfactory. The Inspector took a number of other initiatives to build relationships and improve the police service to Travellers, including the assignment of Community Guards to different sites, organizing a trip for young Travellers to Áras an Uachtaráin and arranging a drugs awareness talk on one of the sites.

Travellers and Guards have identified a number of positive changes in Finglas including the increased visibility of Community Guards on some of the sites, improved response times to calls, greater understanding on the part of both Travellers and Guards, better communication and more active investigation of crime. Obviously, there are differences within communities in terms of their perceptions and experiences of policing and while some Travellers have commented positively on what they see as the Guards more actively tackling anti-social behaviour and crime in their areas, others have complained of excessive policing.

While important improvements have been noted, problems, of course, continue to arise in terms of issues that require a policing response and the manner in which the police respond. There has, however, been a greater openness on the part of some Garda officers and some Travellers to take a problem solving approach when issues arise. This was evident, for example, following a raid for outstanding warrants on one of the sites, which attracted criticisms of heavy handedness, unprofessional behaviour on the part of some of the Garda officers present, computer errors and incorrect names on the warrants. Travellers working in Pavee Point requested a meeting with the Guards at which an agreement was reached to hold a number of clinics to process the outstanding warrants. Travellers who attended the meeting encouraged others to attend the clinics and a large number of outstanding warrants were processed in this way.

Including Travellers in the New National Model of Community Policing

Through the relationship building work of the Pavee Point Mediation Service and various research reports, Travellers have identified a number of pressing issues for their community that require an improved policing response. These include anti-social behaviour and drugs, conflict within the Traveller community, domestic violence, evictions and access to services. Ellis's research into 'Community Oriented Policing within the Traveller Community' suggests that Travellers and Guards may have different priorities when it comes to policing. She notes that in contrast to the identification by Travellers of public safety issues such as feuds, domestic violence and illegal drugs as key factors that influence their quality of life, 'it has been suggested that police officers focus a great deal of effort on issues such as evictions (from public buildings, housing and illegal encampments), motor vehicle violations, recovering stolen property, and the sale of illegal goods'. It is important that Travellers and Gardaí have opportunities to discuss and agree policing priorities for the Traveller community.

The new Joint Policing Committees and Forums are one of the mechanisms for forging partnerships between An Garda Síochána, local authorities, elected representatives and communities, for determining through consultation community needs and policing priorities, and for promoting Garda accountability, transparency and effectiveness. Regular consultation meetings with minority ethnic groups including Travellers at district, divisional and national

levels are another such mechanism. Traveller participation in these different committees and forums is crucial. However, given the low levels of confidence and the vulnerability many Travellers feel in relation to Guards and policing, it is not expected at this stage that many Travellers will be rushing to get involved in these consultative mechanisms. It is therefore incumbent on the Garda organization not only to invite Travellers to participate in the Joint Policing Committees, Forums and consultation meetings with minority ethnic groups, but also to encourage and support their participation on an ongoing basis. Traveller organizations also have a role to play in this regard and Pavee Point continues to encourage Traveller participation.

In addition to including Travellers in mainstream consultation processes (which if managed constructively can have added benefits in terms of improving relationships between Travellers and the wider community), it may be necessary at times to have separate consultative mechanisms with Travellers to ensure that the voice of this small minority does not get lost in committees and forums where the focus may be on the views and needs of the majority population. The Joint Policing Committees and Forums are based on geographic communities rather than communities of interest and nomadism is an interest specific to the Traveller community that could get lost at the local level. Ellis recommends consideration of 'the establishment of a separate national level consultative mechanism that will focus specifically on policing issues for Travellers and will maintain direct links with all local authority areas'. It is important also that links are made between the district, divisional and national level consultation meetings with minority ethnic groups including Travellers and the Joint Policing Committees and Forums.

Travellers consulted for the preparation of a previous submission to An Garda Síochána entitled 'Intercultural Ireland: Identifying the Challenges for the Police Service' spoke of the need for Travellers to meet Guards in non-crisis and non-confrontational settings to build trust and confidence. This could be achieved in a variety of ways: through Community Guards and others, such as Ethnic Liaison Officers, walking around sites and meeting people rather than only coming on to site in response to an incident; through sporting activities; and through Guards attending community events organized by a local Traveller group or community centre. Given that there is a lot of movement within the Garda organization, where positive relationships with the Traveller community have been developed, Travellers have stressed the importance of informing them if a local guard is going to be moved and, where possible, for that Guard to introduce the person who will be replacing them. Otherwise, valuable relationships can be lost and confidence diminished.

It has also been noted that there is a tendency within An Garda Síochána to want to identify a 'community leader' with whom to liaise. Many Travellers have expressed concern about this practice and stress the importance of the Gardaí developing broad relations within the Traveller community. The reason for this is that as with all groups, there are different needs within the Traveller community. Sometimes a dominant individual is sought out by the Guards, who may not articulate the different needs within the community. Equally, given the high level of suspicion that exists within the Traveller community towards the police, Travellers who find themselves singled out by the Guards as a 'leader' for the purposes of liaison can find themselves in a very uncomfortable position within their own community.

Training will inevitably be required to ensure the implementation of the new model of community policing and it is important that Travellers are visible in both the delivery and content of the training. Pavee Point has a long history of involvement with Garda training and

will continue to support the Garda organization with the development and delivery of appropriate training.

Membership of An Garda Síochána should reflect the diversity of the community it serves. Pavee Point welcomes the recent efforts of the Garda organization to recruit people from ethnic minorities including Travellers. Given the severe levels of disadvantage experienced by the Traveller community and the suspicion felt by many Travellers towards the police, it is imperative that An Garda Síochána adopt a sustained long term approach to the recruitment and retention of Travellers within the organization and that it explore alternative avenues of recruitment. Travellers could, for example, be employed on a contract basis to co-deliver with Garda Officers anti-racism and diversity training. It is important to note the recommendation of the Rotterdam Charter that members of minority ethnic groups should not be recruited to police their own communities, but rather to provide police services to the entire population and assigned duties in the same way as other officers.

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