

# **Communicating Better On All Fronts: An Garda Síochána's Communications Strategy**



**June 2015**

## **Overview**

An Garda Síochána is committed to learning from its mistakes, becoming more open and transparent, and changing with the goal of becoming a world-class police service, while maintaining its commitment to community policing.

In order for this to be communicated effectively to key external and internal audiences, a new communications strategy in line with this approach is required.

Public support and trust is vital to An Garda Síochána. Telling the public via the media about how we prevent and tackle crime has been of critical importance in building up this support over generations.

While we still retain the trust of the majority of the public, there are a large number of people whose trust needs to be regained. Surveys show that while there is public and political support for “ordinary Gardai”, many people feel the organisation needs to be better managed.

However, due to the nature of what we do, many people really want to hear about the good work being carried out by An Garda Síochána. This provides us with a significant opportunity.

Communication plays a key role in building or dismantling trust. Because of huge public interest in the work of An Garda Síochána, all strands of media wish to cover it and, when merited, do so in a positive way.

However, the media can only do this if they are told about it. Quickly. And with the correct information. When we or any other police service fails to do this, then due to the speed at which the media now operate, they might by-pass official channels and rely on sources who may provide distorted or inaccurate information.

Protecting prosecutions, operations and the rights of individuals is paramount in our communications. Leaks from the organisation have the potential to undermine these, as well as create significant reputational risk for An Garda Síochána.

To address this, regulations need to be adhered to by all employees. In addition, the organisation must ensure the Garda Press Office has correct information as early as possible so that depending on operational and legal constraints it can be quickly provided to the media. This requires the Press Office having early involvement in operational and crisis/difficult situations.

Internally, it is clear staff feel they are not being kept informed about what is happening within the organisation and the good work they are doing is not promoted effectively. Some stakeholders have also accused us of being closed and unnecessarily secretive.

As such, the objective of the communications strategy is to improve trust in An Garda Síochána by communicating directly and indirectly with the public and other stakeholders about how the organisation is changing for the better, while demonstrating our on-going commitment to day-to-day positive policing.

This will be underpinned by core communications principles of openness and honesty; professionalism; accuracy; engagement; being informative; responsiveness, and being legally sound.

To ensure the credibility of the strategy, it is important we demonstrate change is happening. We also need to be seen to be driving this change rather than it being forced upon us. This will require the organisation to “open-up” more to the media, stakeholders, and key influencers.

An Garda Síochána needs to ensure all communications adhere to the organisation’s key messages around protecting and supporting communities; putting victims first; being a modern and professional police service, and our commitment to openness and accountability.

These communications should be primarily designed to appeal to and reassure the general public, but we also need to target specific communications at groups where trust needs to be considerably improved.

We will do a better job of communicating with our own staff and doing so on a regular basis, especially at this time of change. This will require an Internal Communications Strategy.

To provide consistency across internal and external communications channels, the Office of Corporate Communications will be set-up along the lines of models in other police services where PR, marketing/public information campaigns, multi-media content and internal communications are centralised.

It will be responsible for the implementation of the Communications Strategy with the Garda Press Office continuing its media relations role as part of the Office of Corporate Communications.

Delivery of the strategy will require organisational buy-in so the good work taking place across the organisation can be promoted. There needs to be a greater recognition of the rapid speed at which the media now works and the impact this has on the ability of the Press Office to get out engaging information in the most effective way.

For the organisation, there needs to be a greater adherence to our agreed key messages; an opening up of the organisation to the public, media and stakeholders; a determination to promote good policing; greater and sustained communication with staff, and a commitment to ensuring communications is central to planned operational activity.

For its part, the Office of Corporate Communications will build on its successful social media presence and develop more multi-media content; work with units to develop information and communications programmes; provide a range of Garda ‘experts’ to provide comment to local and national media; identify and meet the needs of particular audiences, and seek to provide greater evaluation of the work it is carrying out.

An Garda Síochána’s new approach to communications will deliver benefits to the citizen, the State and the organisation.

Actively demonstrating An Garda Síochána's professionalism and dedication to duty will improve public trust and support. Providing crime prevention advice in an engaging way will help reassure the public and play a role in reducing crime rates. The State and statutory bodies will be better informed about our work, which will assist them when making decisions on the future of policing. Staff will be kept up-to-date about what is happening in the organisation and why. Ultimately, the result should be an improvement in trust levels internally and externally.

An Garda Síochána needs this trust in order to operate effectively. We have great stories to tell about the work our people are doing every day across the country to keep communities safe. The public want to hear those stories. We need to start telling them more often and in a clear, consistent, engaging and timely way.

### **Communications Strategy**

The strategy is a three-legged approach:

- Accelerate the promotion of the great work taking place throughout the organisation
- Demonstrate we are changing for the better
- Deal with negative news strategically

The revised Communications Strategy for An Garda Síochána is:

Promote policing excellence and our changing culture through a wide variety of communication channels in a co-ordinated and consistent way to demonstrate An Garda Síochána's on-going commitment to protecting and supporting communities and the State.

## **Objectives, Principles, Key Audiences & Key Messages**

In developing the strategy, we have defined what we want to communicate, who we are going to communicate to, and how we are going to do it.

### **What We Want to Achieve**

- To be active in communicating with the public, stakeholders and our people about the positive work being done across An Garda Síochána
- To make it clear to communities that An Garda Síochána works to protect and support them
- To support operational activity
- To demonstrate the organisation's commitment to openness and transparency
- To use communication activities and programmes to help reduce particular crime categories by delivering engaging crime prevention advice
- To maximise new channels of communications to reach disparate audiences
- To develop methods of engagement to create and continue conversations with the aim of working closer with communities and improving public confidence
- To work with stakeholders to maximise opportunities for mutually beneficial engagement
- To engage employees in the developments and changes within An Garda Síochána
- To research and evaluate the impact of communication activity, and utilise the results to shape future communication plans and strategies

### **How We Will Achieve This**

- All communications from An Garda Síochána will be in line with the organisation's strategy
- We will be active, rather than reactive
- Negative situations will be dealt with in an open and transparent manner
- We will open up the organisation in a controlled fashion
- We will ensure the media have a regular flow of interesting and engaging information

- All communications will be cognisant of operational and legal issues
- We will reflect the organisation's commitment to professionalism
- We will measure the impact of our activities

### **Communication Principles**

Be open, honest and transparent

Be informative

Be reassuring

Be active in seeking the public's assistance

Be accurate

Be engaging and relevant

Be accessible

Be professional

Be cognisant of operational constraints

Be compliant with legal issues

Be responsive to what the public wants

Be consistent

### **Who We Need To Communicate To:**

(includes, but not limited to)

The community

Victims of crime

Employees of An Garda Síochána

Government

Oireachtas members and Public representatives

National and local media

The Policing Authority

Garda Inspectorate

Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission

Representative associations & trade unions

Other Emergency Services

Local authorities & Joint Policing Committees

Partner agencies including international partners

NGOs/Voluntary/Charity Bodies

### **What We Will Communicate**

- An Garda Síochána is at the heart of communities and will remain so
- An Garda Síochána is changing – we are focused on cultural renewal, modernisation and professionalism
- This is underpinned by the values of professionalism, honesty, accountability and respect
- An Garda Síochána's focus is on preventing crime, but when crime does occur, we will put victims at the centre of the everything we do, and carry out thorough and professional investigations
- An Garda Síochána listens, learns, develops and grows in collaboration with communities, our stakeholders and our employees
- An Garda Síochána is committed to openness, transparency, and greater accountability
- An Garda Síochána is committed to delivering a victim-centred, world-class police service admired at home and emulated abroad

## **Delivery of the Communications Strategy**

A number of critical initiatives will be undertaken in implementing the Strategy.

These include:

### **Annual Communications Plan**

An annual Communications Plan outlining the main activities to be undertaken to help improve trust levels in An Garda Síochána will be put in place.

### **Office of Corporate Communications**

Currently, a number of units within An Garda Síochána provide information to key stakeholders such as the public, the media, and key influencers. The result is a lack of consistency that is inefficient and constitutes a risk to the organisation.

Under the direction of the Director of Communications, the Office of Corporate Communications will help address this. It will be responsible for implementing the Communication Strategy, which calls for a multi-media and integrated approach across An Garda Síochána's main external and internal communication channels

This will be delivered through a number of units such as the Garda Press Office. Each will have their own remit, but working in tandem and with common strategy and oversight.

This approach is based on models in police services in Northern Ireland, New South Wales, Queensland, Greater Manchester, and the Metropolitan police, which see PR, marketing/public information campaigns, and internal communications under the direction of one office.

### **Communications Advisory Council**

To help give on-going insight into matters such as internal communications and the brand image of the organisation, the Director of Communications will establish a Communications Advisory Council to provide advice and feedback from representatives of members, staff and Reserves throughout the organisation, as well as relevant external experts.

### **Internal Communications Strategy**

Given the scale of the change programme being undertaken, it is absolutely critical for staff to be regularly kept up-to-date on what this means for them and the organisation.



Working with the Strategic Transformation Office and HR & People Development, and taking into account feedback from members, staff and Reserves through mechanisms like the Communications Advisory Council, an Internal Communications Strategy will be developed to ensure all employees are kept informed of relevant information in a timely and engaging way.

### **Local Media Strategy**

Because of their strong links to the communities they cover, local media are incredibly important to An Garda Síochána. While there is generally good interaction between members and local media, there is a lack of standard practice and guidance.

The Local Media Strategy will provide members with a common approach for working with local media to help them provide a regular flow of interesting information and advice to their communities in line with the Communications Strategy.

Specific local spokespeople will be identified and trained so as to provide local and national media with access to Garda spokespeople as required.

### **Garda Brand**

As has been done in other police services, a brand image and values statement for the organisation will be developed.

All internal and external material produced will be in-line with this image, carry the values statement, and adhere to a style guide in terms of wording that is more reflective of a modern, professional police service. The Office of Corporate Communications will ensure adherence to the guidelines.

### **Content Creation**

A number of key communications channels will be revamped (Garda.ie) or expanded (social media sites). We will produce more of our own video content to highlight crime prevention and safety messages and good work, and will introduce additional ways of communicating with the public through blogs and Apps.

### **Evaluation**

Using the quarterly Public Attitude Survey and other methods, there will be regular monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the Communications Strategy and individual

initiatives on public opinion of An Garda Síochána. This information will be used to inform the Communications Strategy and future individual initiatives.

### **Monitoring of Strategy Implementation**

The implementation and effectiveness of the Communications Strategy will be reviewed by the Director of Communications on an ongoing basis. The Director of Communications will provide regular reports on the progress of the Strategy to the Commissioner and the Senior Leadership Team for their review.