



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Council

Quality and Standards in Human Services in Ireland: Policing and the Search for Continuous Improvement

Executive Summary

The issue of progressing quality and standards in policing is often thought to involve a 'strong' regulator rooting out 'bad apples'. This report questions that assumption using the framework of responsive regulation developed in NESC Report No. 124. That overview report argued that quality is often achieved by regulators stimulating those whom they supervise to self-regulate and evaluate, and enlisting third-parties to add moral pressure and insight to this process. This hypothesis is explored by examining how policing has been affected by the establishment of a range of oversight and consultative bodies in Ireland since 2005.

A human service like policing is worth examining since its functioning is largely dictated by the discretion of individual officers which raises the question about how standards are maintained and improved. In addition, quality in terms of policing has often been understood in terms of quantity—more personnel and more patrols—but now it is timely to ask if a service like policing can be delivered in a more nuanced way.

This report first gives an overview of the structure of the garda organisation and then provides some context to the recent emergence of various oversight and consultative bodies within the field of policing. It then details the functions of each of these organisations and examines the contribution that each of them has made to raising standards and contributing to improvements within Ireland's policing service. It asks whether the kind of oversight operated by these bodies is sufficiently 'diagnostic' to uncover the causes of the various complaints and problems uncovered and take adequate preventative action to prevent their reoccurrence. The report also suggests that these bodies have yet to institutionalise procedures that would embed and sustain reform over time.

The report then enquires whether a more promising route towards the advancement of standards is through a structured liaison process between gardaí and local communities and details how this has been accomplished in one area of Dublin city. The report commends the work documented in this case study as enabling a more responsive and tailored police service; however it is difficult to render a final judgement about its efficacy since there is no benchmarking of its work against that of other similar operations conducted elsewhere.

We do not know if there is a better way of policing with a community than that pursued by actors as detailed in the case study and this is because these kinds of review and subsequent revision of practice are not being undertaken either by management or oversight bodies. Each level – local, corporate and regulatory – should influence and learn from the others by clarifying what constitutes quality policing and how it can be achieved. Without this kind of system of learning, it is

difficult to know if progress is being made in terms of a higher-quality service. Thanks to the policing reforms documented in this report, Ireland has all the 'parts' necessary for a well-functioning system of quality policing as suggested by the ideas of responsive regulation. But these parts have yet to be co-opted into a common regime of learning that is conducive to greater quality in policing. Constructing such a system would help to prevent abuses of authority as well as meeting the policing needs of communities.

