



## **Address by GRA President Frank Thornton to the Commissioner:**

Good afternoon, delegates, I would like to take this opportunity to welcome Deputy Commissioner McMahon and Deputy Commissioner Coxon and congratulate both on their recent appointments.

As many of you already know, in my role as President I am obliged to stand up and be the voice of our collective membership, and there is a pressing need to highlight and address the many issues that our members face and the hardship they have endured since we last met.

Day after day, we have faced new challenges adapting to an ever changing public health and legal environment as our country struggled to come to grips with what has become 'the new norm'. We have stood shoulder to shoulder with communities, policing in what has been arguably some of the darkest and most challenging times in our nation's history.

But despite those challenges and unequalled infringements on people's liberties, we have emerged to date with unprecedented levels of public support and trust, something that has been relayed to us on the frontline from the communities that we have protected, served and maintained stability in during this time of uncertainty.

This trust, support, from our communities matters deeply to each and every one of us, but at times, we cannot say that the same level of trust and support has been afforded to us from our Senior Leadership Team within our organisation, and organisation we have given such loyal service to.

The Commissioner gave this association an undertaking that no member would suffer financial loss as a result of implementing the current Contingency Roster to facilitate the policing of this pandemic, yet this commitment has not been honoured and members have suffered financial loss, and continue to suffer financially.

The failure to do so has forced our members, your workers to bring you to the Workplace Relations Commission to try and obtain what you promised to us. When roles are reversed and you perceive our members as not honouring their obligations, as is the case with the alleged 999 cancellations, we find ourselves castigated in the media.

Even now, as we approach a milestone in the history of our great Organisation, a milestone that this association is been excluded from the planning of marking, we meet without the appearance of the Garda Commissioner who has chosen to be elsewhere.

While I welcome the presence of Deputy Commissioner Anne Marie McMahon, and Deputy Commissioner Coxon much of the anger and frustration of our membership across the country that needs to be expressed through me here today needs to be heard by our commissioner.

Our members wish to take issue with the Garda Commissioner in relation to his handling of policing policies, the timing of public statements and what they perceive to be at times, a lack of support shown to the very frontline gardai who have gone above and beyond their duty, to ensure that we live in a safer, fairer, and more inclusive society.

The challenges borne on us as a result of the global pandemic have been met with a proud resilience by our members, who, when faced with difficult, uncertain conditions, made public safety a priority and we carried out our duty to protect and serve with pride, passion and professionalism.

On that note, I would like to applaud our membership for their continued dedication and determination in policing from the frontline even when told that we were not worthy of vaccination.

As the global pandemic swept through our nation and huge emphasis was being placed on personal health and safety and that of those we were in contact with, an already overstretched workforce was asked to face into the unknown without the same level of protection against this deadly virus that was being afforded to all other blue light services.

It is well known that policing is a dangerous occupation which was exasperated with the arrival of the Covid-19. We were asked to carry out additional duties on top of an already excessive workload all the while left unvaccinated.

Despite the anger and frustration felt by our members of being denied vaccines we continued to show flexibility, commitment, and dedication to providing the best possible service to the communities we serve, changing rosters, and adapting to ever changing guidelines, regulations and then restrictions with very little guidance and no training.

In the most difficult circumstances and despite policing and enforcing restrictions that severely restricted the fundamental freedoms that every citizen took for granted, the professionalism and compassion shown by members has avoided confrontation and the need for enforcement on many occasions. We engaged with our communities and supported them throughout out this pandemic, all with the knowledge that we were vulnerable, and unvaccinated.

Our communities could not fathom the ill logical approach by Government and the lack of support from our Senior Leadership Team, but thankfully our frontline colleagues in the H.S.E. recognised and acknowledged the dangers we were exposed to, acknowledged how vulnerable we were and provided the frontline Gardaí with access to unused vaccines at Vaccination Centers throughout the country. On behalf of the members of An Garda Síochána of Garda rank, a sincere and heartfelt thank you to those healthcare professionals who chose to protect our members and their families.

The absence of support from you Commissioner and the Senior Leadership Team during these times has not gone unnoticed and we will never forget the divine inspiration you gave on the 18th of January which was to “take your place in the queue”.

There was utter confusion during the summer months when we struggled to navigate complex and contradictory legislation, guidelines, and instructions with a lack of direction or instruction from the Senior Leadership Team regarding the issue of 'outdoor dining'.

After much speculation and confusion and what appeared to be instructions from politicians advising Gardai how the law should be applied, Commissioner Harris came out to say that we should employ the use of '**discretion**' when policing in such environments.

From the very foundation of our force, a member of An Garda Síochána has been authorized to use discretion and have done so fairly and proportionately ensuring an approach to law enforcement that has served the state well and been endorsed by public attitude surveys, but in recent times the message is coming to our members loud and clear that should you observe any breach in the law, there has to be direct action or else the member concerned may face disciplinary action, or even charges before a court of law.

Commissioner Harris later went one step further – stating last month that his difficulty was not with the use of '*discretion*' but the use of '**preference**'. Well, that was a new one to me, and I'm sure to most of the people in this room, and despite requests, there has been no clarity or explanation to date.

We would argue that the common sense approach is one that has always been applied with strong and sound policing and is the core of policing by consent. Yet these recent developments have created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty has adversely affected the ability of our frontline gardai to apply common sense and have trust in the system they believed they understood or the regime that they work for. This simply must change.

The theme for this Conference is *Communities Matter... And So Do We*. And while protecting and serving our communities and cities remains our No.1 priority, we too have to continue to protect ourselves.

Throughout 2021, our membership has faced many challenges affecting their work life balance, but never once let the public down. But sadly, many of the challenges came from directives from senior management. We believe the decision to unilaterally reduce abstraction rates fails to recognize or acknowledge the flexibility and good will delivered by our members and is indicative of an attitude we have encountered in relation to a number of industrial relations issues that have arisen as a result of policing the pandemic.

Commitments have not been honored in some cases and the agreed roster was changed on one occasion and an attempt was made to change it on another. While it appears that an agreement has been reached to reward some frontline workers, your reward to us is to further laden us with restrictions.

To unilaterally reduce our right to avail a basic employment right is an insult to the individual members who have contributed so much to the national effort. Furthermore, the failure to engage with the association shows contempt for the industrial relations processes that facilitated the policing of the pandemic to date.

The impact of this decision is that the very workers who cannot enjoy time off at Christmas will now be denied an opportunity to avail of some time off either side of the Holiday period. Our members have delivered flexibility and goodwill in abundance since March 2020 and it is unacceptable to them that our employer would choose the season of goodwill to impose such a draconian blunt instrument that will impact on their welfare and work life balance.

We have delivered a roster that automatically delivered a 20% increase in the numbers of members available for duty. Members redeployed and changed their working patterns, many at considerable financial loss and Garda Trainees were deployed to the live policing environment with minimal training, no personal protective equipment and incurred additional costs by being displaced from the Garda College, without consideration or compensation from their employer.

Our members are acutely aware of the difficulties we face as a nation and have delivered what was asked from them time and time again, however there is a limit to what any worker

can deliver or endure. The employment rights and working conditions of Gardaí cannot be diluted to compensate for the fact that there are simply not enough Gardaí to provide a policing service to the people of Ireland.

In 2020 as a result of the Covid Pandemic, the Garda College closed, and its staff were transferred to operational front-line duties. As a result of this classes of trainees were attested and transferred to the frontline, each with a shortened training period. Other classes had their training deferred.

The training program for trainees was altered and they were deployed to the frontline. One class spent a total of 8 months on working units. No provision was made for these trainees to receive any extra financial support during this time. The weekly allowance being a lowly €184.

As a result of representation by this Association, the trainees were allowed to claim the daily subsistence rate for each day they worked. This amounted to an additional €75 per week. This was secured for the classes in 2020 but then was withdrawn and still has not been reinstated, why?

In addition to the extra expenses, trainees had no entitlement to avail of annual leave. This meant that trainees were working the 4 on 4 off roster, which included full nights, weekends, bank holidays for nothing extra and then were denied the opportunity to avail of annual leave.

The Association had to seek their leave and secured two weeks special leave with pay for these classes. It has since emerged that a decision was made by our Senior Leadership Team within the Organization to remove annual leave entitlements for all trainees entering An Garda Síochána. Yee have decided that trainee Gardaí do not warrant annual leave. This is a basic breach of their entitlements under the Organisation of Working Time Act, and in a word: it's shameful.

These trainees, the future of this Organisation, enter the Garda College for one week training after completing 3 weeks online. During this week, one of the first things that they have to do is to sign the Code of Ethics. In fact, this is something that all members of An Garda Síochána

are required to sign if they wish to advance within the Organisation. This is the decision of the Commissioner, I ponder on how ethical that is, but I'm sure the Policing Authority is reviewing the reasoning and legitimacy of such a decision.

We have also had to deal with the issue of growing uncertainty regarding the future rostering system. The current Covid-19 Contingency Roster is due to expire at the end of January, 2022, and we continue to engage with management to try to reach agreement and secure certainty for our membership.

On more than one occasion we have received correspondence from the commissioner suggesting the association and our spokespeople need to be mindful of the potential of undermining public confidence in An Garda Síochána. I can assure you that any public utterances from this association will always be well informed, properly researched and measured.

It is inevitable that the perspective of our members and their experiences will not always sit comfortably with Garda Management, nevertheless we will always stand over and be accountable for the accuracy of what is said in the name of our members.

Commissioner, the manner in which the issue of the management of 999 calls has played out in the public arena has been nothing short of shocking. The women and men who look to their commissioner for leadership have had their professionalism and dedication called into question and this has not been helped by a rush to comment on sensationalist headlines in the absence of facts.

Our members are used to criticism and negative commentary, we accept and embrace oversight and accountability, we do not dispute facts but there is something fundamentally wrong when the Policing Authority Chair and the Commissioner of An Garda Síochána are making statements that damage the reputation of our members and undermine public confidence in advance of facts being established or reports being issued.

Deputy Commissioner, we acknowledge your comments at the recent Policing Authority meeting in which you confirmed what every member knows but our members are deeply hurt that the office you represent here today contributed to a public perception that our members failed to answer or respond to calls for help from thousands of citizens.

In conclusion, it has been a challenging year. That said, I believe the past two years have been among the proudest in our almost 100-year history as we stood hand in hand with our other frontline colleagues to deliver a service in policing, firefighting and healthcare that helped the Irish public through some of their darkest times.

Next year, when we emerge into the dawn of a second century of An Garda Síochána, we dearly hope that the era of Covid-19 will have passed and our strength and resilience survives.

But the message rings loud from this Conference. We support and stand beside all of our membership, whether they be in cities or in rural communities. Whether they serve in large divisions or in single-manned outpost stations. Whether they be on the frontline, or stuck at home awaiting judgement, staring at the abyss.

Ends.