

Speech to Garda Representative Association Annual Conference, Malton Hotel, Killarney by Paul Franey, Secretary of G-Force on Wednesday 30th April 2014.

Check Against Delivery

General Secretary, President, Delegates.

In 2000 I went to Templemore. It was three years before I met another gay Garda. In an organisation of 11,000 people. Three years to meet one other gay Guard.

I had worked for a variety of gay community organisations before I joined the Gardaí. I decided when I went to Templemore that was it. I joined the Gardaí to be a guard. But sometimes the environment we are in forces us to change course. I realised there was some more work that needed to be done.

In 2006, I found myself, with another young guard at 3rd European Gay Police Association Symposium in Stockholm.

We arrived in a beautiful city, to a conference that changed the way we thought about being a gay in the police.

In Stockholm we met police officers from all over Europe.

Police officers who worked in police forces with LGBT employee networks.

Police officers who worked in police forces where LGBT people were visible.

Police officers who worked in police forces where it was possible to bring your whole self to work.

Police officers who worked in police forces where their management supported their visibility

A whole new world opened up. - Then we came home.

We returned to a police force, where once again LGBT employees did not exist, where most LGBT people felt it necessary to hide who they really were.

With no policies in place to support any minority groups. No apparent management support.

That was 2006.

It's 2014 and I'm standing here as an invited guest to talk to the plenary session at the GRA annual conference. We have come a long way. And it's been an interesting journey.

Having built a network of lesbian and gay employees in 2007, we were unsure how to proceed. G-Force had established a clear set of goals and objectives, put in place a constitution and structure, but we were nervous.

We were nervous of approaching senior management in a conservative organisation, with a topic we were aware some didn't want on the agenda.

International experience indicated the initial reaction could be poor.

Thankfully we had the GRA and AGSI to support us. The Staff Associations brought our case to the Garda Commissioner. We were then in a position to move forward.

A few weeks later we had our first article in the Garda Review. There was no going back.

Once we started we hit the ground running. We networked with a variety of NGO's and other employee groups. We pushed for a much stronger focus on internal supports in the Garda Diversity Strategy that was being drawn up, and we were only able to push for them because of the GRA support we got. And I would like to thank the GRA Welfare Committee for their support at this time.

Trying to build links with the organisation, and show we were there to support Garda management, we nominated An Garda Síochána as 'Employer of the year' in the national gay and lesbian federation annual awards.

It was a bit like President Obama getting a Nobel peace prize when only in the job few weeks. It wasn't something he had earned yet, it was more an indicator of what was expected of him. It wasn't an easy decision and many G-Force members said it was premature. But we made the decision to nominate the Commissioner as employer of the year. And the National Gay and Lesbian Federation gave the award to An Garda Síochána.

This gave us the opportunity to get further media attention for the group, which was key to building visibility and selling a case for the work we were doing.

In 2010 and 2011 we staffed recruitment stands at the Dublin LGBT pride festivals, building links with the communities we serve and selling An Garda Síochána as an employer of choice.

We have networked extensively with the European Gay Police association and have supported a number of other countries develop groups just like ours. At a European level we are highly regarded as an effective and forward thinking LGBT network.

In Ireland we have been model for the development of LGBT employee networks in other organisations, such as the networks in the Irish Prison Service and Dublin City Council who we work very closely with. In fact we worked closely with the Irish Prison Service and it's Director General to help build a very successful network in the challenging prison environment, all in the space of just one year. It's amazing what can be done with executive level support.

The pinnacle of our achievements to date was the hosting of the 6th European Gay police association conference in Dublin Castle in 2012.

Organising an international police conference on your days off is hard work. But that's what we did, a small group of people in their spare time brought a large delegation of European and American police officers to Dublin. The delegates were welcomed by The President of Ireland to a reception at Aras An Uachtairain and the conference proper was opened by the Minister for Justice. It is our biggest achievement to date.

Again that wasn't without its challenges. In the weeks before the conference we found ourselves in a lonely place. However, the Garda Representative Association and the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors stood firmly beside us, and the conference went ahead with only limited obstruction, and thankfully it was a massive success.

We will not forget the support that the General Secretary and his team gave us during that time. The importance of having a Representative Association to support staff in difficult times cannot be overstated. It is vital that all employees have strong representation and that they in turn support their Staff Associations. You never know when you might need their help.

As a group we worked with University College Dublin to develop first class training tools for police officers on LGBT issues. These Irish scenario based tools are now in use in a number of European countries to train police officers on LGBT policing issues.

We have used these tools only last month to provide awareness training to ten Gardaí working with the LGBT community in Dublin city centre. Again activities we undertake on our rest days and annual leave. The organisation would not provide training in this area, so we filled the vacuum. We do it because we believe it's important, we have spent years studying this area and developing expertise, we enjoy it, and we would like to do a lot more.

Some of you may be asking why are we here? Is there really a need for groups like G-Force?

We have taken an evidence based approach to our work since we started organising. This evidence base is vital for two reasons.

Firstly, many people don't like the idea of any minority group getting what they would term 'special attention'. Evidence is vital to prove a need for work in this area.

Secondly, without knowing what the issues are that face members on the ground, suitable interventions cannot be put in place.

Quality research is vital to identifying the issues that members face, so we can try and provide the assistance that is needed. This is true in many areas of policing that will affect your members, not just LGBT staff.

In 2007 I conducted a study of the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual Gardaí. It was the first opportunity many members had to outline their experiences as a Garda that happened to be gay or lesbian. 14 members gave a detailed outline of their time in An Garda Síochána, and its sad to day that the stories they told were appalling. Lives of fear, isolation, feeling utterly invisible and of dreadful workplace homophobia.

It was based on this research that we built our aims and objectives, and a determination to enhance the workplace culture in An Garda Síochána.

Knowing we had an international conference coming to Dublin and being aware of the importance of quality research in supporting the business case for an inclusive workforce, we identified two senior academics in Dublin City University in 2011 who were willing to undertake a study of the experiences of LGB Gardaí.

Four years later, this comprehensive study told a tale that was only slightly better than the one told in 2007, it indicated we still had a very long way to go.

Homophobia, especially homophobic language in the workplace was identified as a serious problem for our members.

And lastly in 2013 I conducted a survey of G-Force members to examine if we were providing the service that they required, many indicated in their responses that homophobic language in the workplace was the biggest problem they still faced as gay and lesbian Gardaí. Homophobic bullying, while not widespread, is still a problem in a number of areas.

Am I arguing that all Gardaí are homophobic? Absolutely not. First of all, many Gardaí find homophobic remarks greatly offensive. There are many Gardaí who never engage in the homophobic 'banter' that is prevalent in some of our stations and offices.

Increasingly too, we have openly lesbian and gay Gardaí in our station parties and on our units. All of a sudden homophobic 'banter' stops.

Given the close-knit relationships of policing units, colleagues become very defensive in order to protect those around them from abuse. This is where the Garda workplace is at it's best. We do look after each other, once you're part of that team.

Not all units and stations however have openly gay members.

The number of units with members who have not yet felt comfortable disclosing this fundamental part of themselves to their colleagues is in all likelihood far greater than the number with openly gay Gardaí. It is these Gardaí who most have to listen to and put up with the ongoing use of homophobic language in work. And it is a problem.

Gardaí aren't 'created' in Templemore. They are normal people who come from the general population. Nurtured and formed by their families, communities, schools and sports clubs, their behaviours and attitudes have taken shape long before they ever put a uniform on. Given that homosexuality was only relatively recently decriminalised, it is a fact that many Gardaí trained when gay male sexuality was a criminal offence.

Yes, our society has moved on from then, but the prevalence of homophobic language in our schools and sports clubs, on our streets and in the Garda Síochána itself shows there is still work to be done. "homo", "queer" and "faggot" are standard terms in the discourse of many people across Ireland.

It is to be expected that such homophobic attitudes and behaviours would be brought from the communities into the Garda organisation. It is equally to be expected, however, that once these people enter the Garda workplace, that there would be training, policies and management-led work practices all to ensure all such homophobic language and behaviour was eradicated from organisational culture and discourse. Again, here we have a long way to go.

It costs a 'straight' Garda nothing not to use words like "queer", "faggot" or "gay" in a derogatory manner. It won't stop them being able to pay their mortgage or put food on the table. It won't reduce their chances of promotion. The cost to a gay Garda of hearing this oppressive and insulting language, is massive. It damages their self-esteem, it makes them nervous of being 'outed', of being rejected by their colleagues and it damages their pride in belonging to the Garda organisation.

It's quiet simple: Gardaí don't ever need to use these words in the workplace, so why do gay and lesbian Gardaí regularly have to listen to them?

Great offence is regularly caused to the Garda parents of LGBT children, Gardaí who have gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, friends and relatives. A huge sub-group of the organisation.

The hashtag of this conference is drawing the line. Well here is a line we can draw. Can we please draw a line on homophobic language in the workplace?

It has to be said however, that the situation really has improved for gay and lesbian people in AGS over the last few years.

I'm pretty confident that if you had to be gay or lesbian in a police force, An Garda Síochána is one of the best ones in the world. I can only see maybe the UK and Dutch police as being in a better position in terms of homophobia and workplace culture. We have worked with European, American, Australian and even Asian police forces.

I don't think it's any secret that we are one of the most effective police forces in the world, despite the recent media focus. As workforce cultures go we are without a doubt one of the most positive, welcoming and respectful groups of police officers worldwide.

And I don't think we give ourselves enough credit for that. I think what is important here is that we look towards where we want to be in five years time. There are a few police forces ahead of us. We can focus on the fact that we are better than most, or we can focus on how we can become a first class force with the best internal culture. And that's where leadership from the Garda staff associations, and from Garda management is be key.

I'd like to talk for a second about heavy lifting.

I have spent eight years studying the path that each of the police networks in the EGPA has taken, and there is a very clear pattern.

- One or two police officers put their heads above the parapet and make a case for inclusion.
- Momentum grows and they network, locally and at EU level.
- They are ignored or viewed with suspicion by their managers.
- They start providing support for the LGBT community outside of the internal police support role.
- They get recognition from local government, politicians and external organisation.
- Then the police service starts to look at what they do and incrementally consider providing recognition and support. Slowly.

In every police force it is a ground up exercise, started by police officers of junior rank, who do the heavy lifting. They take all the risks. They often get hurt in the process.

What is it about the big tough men who run the police forces across Europe that they are afraid to touch this topic. It's like it's toxic. They will take on criminal gangs and terrorists. But they will not acknowledge that there are gays in their police force and that homophobia is a problem.

And it is always men. Female managers don't seem to have a problem.

All across Europe, every time.

And that's why I'm here today. I'm here today because we did the heavy lifting. We took the risks. We put our heads above the parapet. We on occasion got hurt. It wasn't easy. It's not easy to stand here today telling this story. But it has to be told.

It has to be told because there is a distance to go yet for other people. We're just one group of people in An Garda Síochána.

It's not all about us.

We have recruited a significant number of Chinese Gardaí and Gardaí from other ethnic backgrounds. We've recruited them, trained them, given them a uniform and sent them out to do one of the most difficult jobs that one can undertake. And that's that.

As a Garda you'll be abused, threatened, shouted at, spat at and called every name under the sun. Try doing it as a black or Chinese Garda. Add another layer of abuse, a layer that is not just directed at your uniform, but at your ethnicity, your skin colour, something very personal that already sets you apart and marks you as an outsider. Something you will be very aware of.

And how do we cope with the abuse we take as Gardaí. We have strong bonds, tight knit units, we go drinking together, pints then coppers. We get tickets to the GAA match or go watch the rugby together. Culturally Irish ways of dealing with stress. Hard to fit into when you are born and reared in China or Pakistan.

Our ethnically diverse members are all junior, there is nobody with rank yet. And many come from cultures where it is hard to admit you have a problem, where saving face is important.

This is my challenge today to the Garda Representative Association and your partners in the three other Staff Associations. Please, don't let this group of people do the heavy lifting.

Where the Garda organisation has not fully put in place the structures to ensure people are supported in the workplace, the next line of responsibility lies with you. You have provided us with great support. I would ask that you be proactive from here on and make building a workforce based on respect and understanding even more central to what you do as an organisation.

And don't just think gays and non-Irish born Gardaí. How many women have we here today? Very few. I remember reading reports in Human Resources from the 1960's and 1970's. What was written about the then 'Bhan' Gardaí was a disgrace. Thankfully much of this old fashioned sexism has been

eradicated from our organisation, however, for a number of women, problems remain.

This is about all of us. This is about a culture of respect. This is about the most important resource An Garda Síochána has. Its people. All the fast cars and new uniforms and IT systems in the world will only help An Garda Síochána so much. If we work on improving how An Garda Síochána looks after its Human Resources. If we focus on how we select, train, support, mentor and appreciate the people who make policing happen. We can absolutely move to being one of the very best police forces in the world. We're already very close. We just need a new focus.

And it should be an easy sell. Happy members do better policing. Committed police officers catch more criminals. Detect more crimes. Seize more drugs. The business case is well established. There is a reason the most successful companies across the world invest in their people. Committed employees enjoy coming to work. Committed employees do a better job.

This is a time of great change. We have new leadership. We have an opportunity for positive growth that I have never seen before. I would ask the Garda Representative Association, in conjunction with your colleagues in the other staff associations, use this opportunity for change to build an organisation where at a structural & policy level and at a person to person level, our valuable human resources become the central focus of how we do our business. A little respect goes a long way.