

Gay, lesbian and bisexual members open about their sexual orientation are an asset to the force. It's time to move on, write Paul Franey and Lora Bolger

G-force

Not special rights - just equal rights

“Gardaí who have come out have reported little direct discrimination or abuse. The story is quite different to those who are not out.”

A person's sexuality

should only be of interest to someone who wants to have sex with them. Generally speaking, it is quite abhorrent to think about colleagues, friends or family having sex with their partner. Children will often cringe when they see their parents kissing. In the work setting, a colleague's sexual orientation is irrelevant to the professionalism of the job. That's how it should be.

In practice, open diversity of sexuality was as absent as a multiplicity of religions and ethnicity. Garda culture has been slow to change and adapt, but the catching up process with a changing society has been rapid. The accelerated recruitment campaign reflected the national culture change.

In 2006 the first Chinese garda reported for duty at Pearse Street Garda Station. Not since 1959 when the first female gardaí joined the force has such visible diversity been seen in An Garda Síochána. African and Polish members were soon to follow and the representation of some minority groups is clear for all to see.

Unfortunately the invisible group of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) gardaí still remains largely hidden and silent. Physically unrecognisable, the longest serving minority group within the organisation remains victims of discrimination. In fact, up until 1993 male members suffered legal discrimination and many equality issues in terms of family law for both sexes still exist today.

The very existence of lesbian, gay and bisexual gardaí was not officially acknowledged until 2007 when the garda organisation made provision for a Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Liaison Officer to be appointed under the Garda Síochána bullying policy. This appointment was carried out at the request of the garda staff associations.

An unofficial network for lesbian, gay and bisexual gardaí has been in existence since 2006, meeting regularly and developing the framework for a support network. On 5th February 2009 the Garda Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Support Network was established with the signing of the group's constitution; Group G was born.

Confidential

The group is first and foremost a support structure that aims to provide peer support and assist people who wish to make the transition from hiding a huge part of their life to being open and honest with themselves, their colleagues and their families. From a garda management perspective the group provides a facility for developing understanding and managing internal and external diversity issues while fostering a culture of openness, acceptance and respect within the garda organisation.

A vital feature of any LGB support network is confidentiality. Gay gardaí will require different levels of support depending on their personal circumstances and will be comfortable with different levels of integration in the group's activities. Some members

Imagine... “how it can feel to spend years denying your own deepest truths, to sit silently through classes, meals, and church services while people you love toss off remarks that brutalise your soul.”

Bruce Bawer, *The Advocate*, 28th April 1998

may wish to meet with just two committee members for a coffee and a chat in a safe venue while others may be happy to meet larger groups at social events or at committee meetings.

Group G aims to provide assistance to people regardless of where they are in terms of their own personal circumstances. Where necessary we can refer people to other support structures if there are particular needs they have that the groups members are not in a position to assist with. For example, more specific needs can be met in the parents’ support group or a support group for married gay men. Currently the group has members of most garda ranks and retired members. We are also in contact with a number of civilian staff. The group’s support for members

in difficult circumstances has made a very positive impact on a number of lives. We hope that through a publicised and officially supported group, the support structure will be in a position to provide assistance to many more members and to the garda organisation as a whole.

Group G has developed a very supportive network of contacts with similar police organisations throughout the UK and Europe. In particular we have built up a great working relationship with our closest policing neighbours in the form of the PSNI Gay Police Association.

These groups have been of great assistance to us in our development, giving us access to international policies and best practice. While we may have a long way to go to catch up with many of these international police groups we

do have a modern and supportive management structure. The Garda Diversity Strategy is a progressive policy document that supports Group G’s aims and goals. We should be able to develop quickly into a first class lesbian, gay and bisexual support structure and assist the garda organisation and all its members.

While there have been some disturbing cases of direct discrimination against openly gay staff in the garda organisation this is a rare reaction to members coming out. Gardaí who have come out have reported little in terms of direct discrimination or abuse because of their sexual orientation. However the story is quite different to those who are not out.

Disrespect

Although homosexuality is becoming more accepted, homosexuals still deal with homophobic abuse in the form of verbal or physical bullying at home, work or elsewhere. Homophobic behaviour is something that almost every gay person (and likely even some who are not gay) has to deal with. The casual everyday use of homophobic language is widespread. Whether made through blatant homophobia, misplaced machismo or ‘harmless banter’ the result is always insulting and offensive.

The challenge of changing our perception

Constitution and Establishing Document of the Garda Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Support Network on the 5th February 2009

1. Definitions

- 1.1 The Network shall be known as – Garda Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Support Network.
- 1.2 Full Members - refers to serving members of the full-time service, retired gardaí, student gardaí, serving garda reserve members, serving civilian staff and anyone who in the opinion of the Executive Committee has a significant relationship with An Garda Síochána.
Associate Members – refers to any person who identifies with the group’s goals and supports the group’s activities.
- 1.3 LGB - refers to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual.
- 2. Aim of Support Network
- 2.1 To provide a confidential support structure for LGB members, both personally and professionally, within An Garda Síochána.
- 3. Objectives of Support Network
- 3.1 To provide a support structure to assist LGB

- members of An Garda Síochána who may require assistance in dealing with issues arising from their sexual orientation.
- 3.2 To provide a forum for social interaction and peer support for LGB members of An Garda Síochána.
- 3.3 To provide information on internal and external support service providers.
- 3.4 Assist the garda organisation in its implementation of its Diversity Strategy.
- 3.5 To provide assistance to An Garda Síochána in the development of policy relating to LGB/ diversity issues, if requested.
- 3.6 To assist An Garda Síochána in the provision and delivery of diversity training to employees if requested.
- 3.7 To increase the visibility of LGB staff in An Garda Síochána through a variety of communication initiatives.
- 3.8 To provide assistance to An Garda Síochána

- when dealing with its LGB customers in a variety of policing situations, if requested.
- 3.9 To assist garda LGB liaison officers (external liaison officers) in their role, if requested.
- 3.10 To advocate the business value of diversity.
- 3.11 To assist Garda Human Resource Management in its recruitment function, if requested.
- 3.12 To provide information and support for members experiencing bullying, harassment and/or sexual harassment in the workplace.
- 3.13 Promote equality and understanding within An Garda Síochána.
- 3.14 To liaise with other LGB organisations (including police organisations) to ascertain best practice, nationally and internationally on a range of LGB issues.
- 3.15 Liaise with staff associations on areas of concern.
- 3.16 Secure adequate funding.

of acceptable language is an achievable one. It costs individual gardaí nothing to stop using homophobic language. It won't effect that members' work return, their ability to pay their mortgage or enjoy a Monday night out after working a week of nights. But it can have a very positive impact on the men and women, their colleagues, who have to go to work every day and endure comments that affect them in a very personal way. It can even help alleviate some of the difficulties experienced by some LGB members such as loneliness, depression and stress-related health difficulties.

Homophobia is just that: a phobia. It is primarily a function of ignorance and inexperience. Anyone who has actually had the opportunity to make friends with lesbians and gays comes to realise that we are no different, for better or for worse, than anyone else. Although difficult to quantify, if current estimates are accurate then through sheer probability everyone has undoubtedly been friends and colleagues with gay people (perhaps who were still in the closet). They might not realise it, but chances are that lesbians and gays have already been an integral and meaningful part of their lives.

LGB gardaí work on regular units and as detectives; they work in national units as serious crime investigators and in community policing units in urban stations. You go on patrol with them and when you are under pressure they drive with lights and sirens to get to you to assist you. And you do the same for them. Most of the time you just don't know it.

Although it may put us into conflict with our own prejudices we are all learning to understand the need to value and respect difference. Equal rights are not special rights. Let's work together to challenge intolerance and disrespect in all its forms. ■



Group G is a peer support group comprised of LGB members of An Garda Síochána. They can be contacted at: email: group42732@yahoo.com Contact number of LGB liaison officer under bullying policy: 086 828 8858 Group G contact number: 087 202 7609

My life as a gay garda

WHILE I AM only a recent member of An Garda Síochána at the age of 34, I have always wanted to "try" the gardaí since leaving college. Coming from a rural community where stereotypes are reinforced from an early age I grew up playing hurling and rugby like most of my peers. I never heard of a gay guard. I would have happily joined the gardaí from an earlier age but I felt that I would have to compromise my identity as a gay man, something I was not prepared to do, as I had a fairly difficult time after I told my parents and family that I was gay. In my early twenties, I decided to wait a few more years.

In the late 1990s I remember contacting an inspector in confidence seeking some information about what it would be like for a gay man to join the guards and to my amazement he advised me not to join, as it was largely a homophobic organisation, light years away from accepting openly gay men and women. I was very disappointed to hear that and took him at his word.

Years passed and I saw numerous recruitment initiatives pass without applying for them. I continued to develop a professional career and my identity as a gay man improved as time went on. I was very involved as a volunteer in the local gay community which helped me come to terms with my sexual orientation. Now to family and friends it is not a big deal anymore. As I approached the cut-off age for applying to the gardaí, the urge again to try this profession out began to interest me. So I applied and was successful in my application.

As I drove through the gates in Templemore the day I started training in Phase I, I made a promise that there was no way I was going to go back into the closet when I joined the gardaí, after spending so much time and heartache coming out of it. Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened.

Almost immediately I was confronted with a macho culture – having entered the Garda College, people automatically presumed that I was straight. There was little or no acceptance of diversity in the college among my peers. I had to endure the laughter when staff and students in the college made public jibes at gay men and women. A staff member was ridiculed in a

lecture theatre of 180 students by a sergeant, one of his colleagues, to peels of laughter from the students listening to him, as people who were different and stood out were criticised and mocked.

This made me want to recoil even further, keeping my sexual identity hidden. Thankfully I sought and received some support from some college staff when a classmate started making comments about me to others in the class and he had to be openly challenged on it before it escalated.

On phase II my tutor garda was a consummate homophobe who spoke in the most disparaging terms about gay members he had met during his career. He made no mention of the calibre of garda they were, rather what they chose to do in their private lives.

I continued with the training saying that I would come out once I was attested. But that never happened; those jibes that I heard in the college and on phase II continued in the station.

Any interaction with any gay person in the course of duty has to be discussed and commented on amongst the unit and it always ends up that I have to listen to my colleagues comment inappropriately about the nature of the interaction of the person involved.

I see myself as very much part of the unit, my work return was fairly high and I realise that I am becoming a good police officer. Soon after attestation I slowly started to realise that I didn't want anything to compromise what could be a promising career in the guards. A rather unhealthy dose of paranoia began to creep in.

At that time I got in contact with the newly formed support group for gay members - and found it really beneficial. Even though I am helping out there I am the only member that has not come out. Not that I feel I need to come out to my unit, but I smile when I think how I struggled, and in some ways continue to struggle, with my sexual orientation and how confident I was as a gay man before joining the gardaí.

Today I feel that I should be entitled to come to work without having to listen to my colleagues as they comment on something on which they have never experienced; the isolation, confusion and struggle that every gay person in this society endures.