Listening exercise proves a success with gardaí and youths

Kitty Holland

An innovative project, in which young people in Rialto in Dublin invited gardaí to hear their grievances with some elements of the force, has produced a "new understanding" between the two groups, according to a senior garda.

Gardaí now plan to replicate the model across the south inner city.

The event, an initiative of the Rialto Youth Project, emerged from a long-term project where local young people recorded instances where they felt powerless in their everyday lives.

According to artist Fiona Whelan, who worked on the project, "an overwhelming number of the stories of powerlessness involved the gardaí."

Contact was made with Chief Supt John Twomey of Pearse Street station, with a view to having gardaí respond in some way to the stories.

The result was an event in July where 26 uniformed gardaí read the stories back to the young people. Titled The Day In Question, the occasion was filmed and makes for emotional and powerful viewing.

At one point a young garda reads in a strong Dublin accent another man's experiences of being stopped and questioned "about 20 times a month" because, he feels, his older brother had been in trouble with gardaí.

"I wouldn't mind if I was in the wrong. I go to the shops, they stop me. I go for a DVD, they stop me. I go to meet my mates, they stop me. I can't win."

"They know the amount of times they stop me they are passing me off. They are waiting for me to do one thing they want so they can drag me down to the station."

"Some say the gardaí are all right, but I can't see them as all right because of the way they treat me."

A story from another young person tells how gardaí forcefully searched his family's home, while neighbours looked on and his mother grew increasingly distressed. "I felt powerless. There was nothing I could do. It's hard for my family."

Authorship of the stories remains anonymous. Among those who took part in organising the event were Jamie Hendrick (19) from Dolphin House flats and Michael Byrne (22) from Crumlin.

"We were nervous. I was shocked to have 26 coppers sitting in front of me, reading back young people's stories. It made us feel listened to."

The 26 gardaí, too, were "very nervous," says Chief Supt Twomey. "We'd never done anything like it before, but they did it and were happy to do it because of the context of examining power and its use and impacts."

"I think it has given us a greater understanding of youths, of what's going on for them. It has led to improved practices by our people, I'd say, and a greater meeting of minds."

Plans are progressing for a similar project with young people in the Pearse Street area, he says. "That is going to happen and I think it will be of enormous benefit."