

Opening Statement of Mr Adrian Tennant, Chairperson, Scouting Ireland at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs.

13th March 2018

Mr Chairman, members of the Committee,

I wish to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you again today. My name is Adrian Tennant and I am the Chairperson of the Board of Directors. With me today is Dr John Lawlor, Chief Executive Officer of Scouting Ireland and Mr Ian Elliott, independent Safeguarding Consultant who has been working with Scouting Ireland since 2017, acting as the Interim Safeguarding Manager for the last year.

Let me begin by confirming that Scouting Ireland is a safe organisation. The letter received by Scouting Ireland on the 22nd February last, dated the 18th February from the Child & Family Agency, Túsla, shocked Scouting Ireland to the core. I read this letter, not only as a Scouter, but also like so many other volunteers, as a parent to three daughters, aged from 10 to 17, all of whom enjoy the adventure that is Scouting. As such I was shocked by the letter, the content of which concerned me greatly.

Scouting Ireland has a track-record of working with Túsla and I want to reaffirm that Scouting Ireland is not in conflict with Túsla. We value cooperation with Túsla and will work closely with them so that confidence in Scouting Ireland as the largest non-formal education provider on the island is restored.

I would like to demonstrate the progress that Scouting Ireland has made since last we met on a number of the key issues that have been discussed here before.

- **Governance at Scouting Ireland**

We are finalising our plans regarding the Oversight and Executive function of the organisation. The current Board is now fully disentangled from the Executive function, which had not been the case with preceding Boards; it is now well-established and regarded as a Board of Oversight.

We have sought expert advice that will see us fully compliant with the Governance Code for Type C organisations. We are announcing our new structure in the coming weeks and have briefed the Transition Implementation Monitoring Group in that regard.

In relation to membership, the majority of Groups have now transferred to membership of the Company rather than the outgoing association with the remaining groups being captured in a mopping-up exercise. This is a significant development and is a practical demonstration of the progress to date in the change over to the “Company Only” format for Scouting Ireland.

- **Independent Barrister Report**

The committee will be aware that the independent barrister report, completed by Ms Lynch BL, was received by Scouting Ireland some weeks back. This report, commissioned by the National Management Committee (NMC) of the Association, has been received by the NMC, reviewed by a sub-committee who have accepted the report in full and determined that the 4 respondents in this matter be subject to disciplinary procedures.

The Board will consider the outcome of the disciplinary procedure and, once complete, come to a view with regard to future membership.

- **Accountability**

Scouting Ireland has worked hard at developing the good working relationship with Minister Zappone and her Department of Children and Youth Affairs. We recognise and are grateful for the commitment of Minister Zappone to scouting.

In relation to the recommendations of Ms Jillian Van Turnhout in her review of Scouting Ireland at the request of the Minister, Scouting Ireland is pleased to be able to inform this committee that we will be submitting quite a positive final progress report to the Minister later this month. We have completed all of the set-out recommendations. Those elements that were of concern due to lack of funding can now be addressed due to the Minister's indication of the improved financial support.

I am also able to say today that a key element, the recruitment of a permanent Safeguarding Manager, has been completed. The new Safeguarding Manager is due to begin his employment with Scouting Ireland on April 5th and an announcement on this appointment will be made shortly.

Safeguarding

The element of Scouting under most scrutiny is our Safeguarding capability and practice. As Chairperson of Scouting Ireland, I would like to confirm that Scouting Ireland is a safe organisation for our young people and adult volunteers. Our Safeguarding Team, who have worked over and above the call of duty in the past number of months, have provided their regular service to the organisation whilst at the same time, operating our successful helpline for survivors of historic abuse.

You might wonder why I would refer to a helpline, set up under such circumstances, as being successful. The answer is quite simple. Túsla received 49 calls and closed down it's help line before Christmas. An Garda Síochána received 5 calls. Scouting Ireland received 180 calls to date. Those that wished to tell their story had options with regard to whom to speak to. Most spoke to us and so, we do not accept the criticism of Túsla regarding our helpline.

We have a team of professional staff who have listened, respected and assisted 180 individual callers tell their story and feel that they have been heard. They have provided heart-felt individualised apologies on behalf of Scouting Ireland for the wrongs in our legacy organisations and all have been offered an opportunity to engage in counselling.

Notwithstanding the great courage shown by survivors in coming forward to tell their story and the recognition by Scouting Ireland and our professional staff in how difficult this can be, it may, at times, help those so badly hurt and betrayed by former members, to tell their story to someone who can understand how the former organisations operated.

At the time of this committee meeting, the most recent case that has come to Scouting Ireland's attention has been in 1998. The majority of cases still refer to the decades between the 1960's and 1990's, with a smaller number either side of that.

It is very humbling to note that the majority of our survivors still hold a high regard for Scouting, recognise that Scouting Ireland is not the legacy organisations in which they were badly treated and wish no harm to our organisation that continues to do so much good for young people in our communities across the country.

Engagement with Túsla

I now want to address the letter received from Túsla..

Our relationship with Túsla is a, professional one and we are constantly engaged with them on all aspects of safeguarding.

We received a letter from Túsla on the 22nd of February which, as already stated, caused us serious shock and concern. Many of the issues raised in the letter had not been brought to our attention previously.

The following working day, 25th of February, Scouting Ireland hosted an interagency meeting with Túsla and An Garda Síochana where Scouting Ireland's representatives asked the parties present if they were content with Scouting Ireland's engagement with them and the provision of information to them. It was confirmed that they were.

Following receipt of the letter, Scouting Ireland requested an urgent meeting with Túsla, which took place on Thursday, 7th March last. This was a productive meeting and concentrated on Scouting Ireland's efforts to understand Túsla's concerns. During this meeting, we outlined the dedication of our safeguarding team and our adult volunteers and reiterated our absolute commitment as a child-centered organisation to safeguarding. We further reaffirmed our commitment to continuing to work with Túsla in a positive and collaborative way, as we have always done since their inception, and with all relevant statutory authorities.

We have, over the past few days agreed, on a joint Action Plan which includes a number of actions.

These include the following;

- Túsla representatives will make a presentation to our Board of Directors on Children First and Safeguarding.
- Scouting Ireland's new Safeguarding Manager will be our liaison person with Túsla.
- We will share our updated implementation strategy with Túsla, which include mechanisms to review the implementation of Scouting Ireland's Child Safeguarding Statement, updated policies and procedures and support implementation of same throughout the organisation.

This strategy will also include mechanisms for monitoring and quality assurance of safeguarding policies and procedures and the implementation of same.

- Further, we have committed to engage with An Garda Síochana and Túsla to discuss the management of allegations regarding the case samples outlined within the letter. Specific to this, Scouting Ireland would like to reassure our members and the public that we do not, and have never, investigated claims. Scouting Ireland is a child-centered organisation. We have always, and will continue, to listen to our young people. This extends to our safeguarding team when a youth member presents with concern and this is done where the welfare of the child is paramount.
Scouting Ireland is, as ever, committed to reviewing our Safeguarding Risk Assessment and relevant procedures with a specific focus on our code of behaviour regarding overnight trips and jamborees.
- Finally, Scouting Ireland is constantly aiming to improve and develop its safeguarding practice. To that end, the Board of Directors will consider how best to draw learning from the successful provision of a dedicated helpline over the last number of months, thus ensuring professional development within Scouting Ireland.

However, we would like to assure our members and the public that at no time have any of Scouting Ireland's safeguarding team been compromised in the delivery of the helpline. Scouting Ireland chose to face the difficult problems within our former organisations. We chose to do this in as open and transparent a manner as possible. This is further evidenced by our continual reporting of our updated figures and the development of a Victim Support Programme.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to conclude by telling the committee of the dedication of our youth members, their parents, our adult volunteers and our professional staff team. Our unsung heroes that are the 14,000 adult volunteers who have kept Scouting in this country going in their communities through difficult times and still manage to grow our numbers and provide quality programme in a safe environment, always with the young person to the fore.

And finally, our small, dedicated and highly effective staff who support our Groups to do what they do best and who, in carrying out that role, too hold the child at the centre of everything that they do.

As this committee will be aware, Scouts are brave. We will climb any mountain, cross any sea, weather any storm to ensure that our way of life, our reason for being, our shared mission with 50 million fellow scouts around the globe, will not falter or be taken from us. We will Scout another day, we will do that together.

Adrian Tennant

Chairperson of Scouting Ireland

March 2019