

SICK AND INDIGENT ROOMKEEPERS SOCIETY

228th Annual General Meeting – 15th November 2018

CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT

This statement is presented to the 228th Annual General Meeting of the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers Society. Founded in 1790, we are Dublin's oldest charity.

My first duty is to note with much regret that John Lynch has recently stepped down as chairman and as a director after over twenty years of service to the Society. He had served as our chairman since 2016. He was hugely dedicated to the Society and was particularly conscious, as we all are, of its traditions – and of its longevity. His great achievement as chairman was to impose a tighter discipline on our expenditure, something necessitated by our much reduced investment income in recent years.

The economic environment has been very challenging for organisations like ours that rely on voluntary support – and, while it is difficult and painful sometimes to turn down worthy applications for assistance, we need to be realistic as regards the overall level of assistance that we can provide so as to ensure that we preserve the Society and pass it on to the next generation to continue its good work. Over the course of his chairmanship, John guided us well as we made the hard decision to curtail expenditure – and, as part of this exercise, re-set our priorities in considering applications for assistance. He leaves the Society in good shape. I thank him for all his work with the Society, and especially for his work as chairman – which, I might add, he persevered with despite recurring health problems over the past twelve months. I know I speak for all members of the board when I wish him all the very best for the future. I am glad to report that he will remain as an ordinary member of the Society.

When John retired from the board in mid-October, I was asked to assume the chairmanship of the Society on a temporary basis until today's Annual General Meeting in view of my previous service as chairman between 2012 and 2016. I was happy to agree to this, and I present this statement in the capacity of acting chairman.

One of the tasks which I had to undertake as acting chairman was to chair at short notice a long-planned strategy meeting to review our operations generally, held on 3 November last. We had not had such a meeting since 2016. At this meeting, we confirmed the Society's long-standing commitment to providing assistance to the people of Dublin without distinction of race, gender, religion or politics. This has been our constant focus since our foundation in 1790, though our remit has been extended since then to cover the entire city and county of Dublin – and today we only accept applications for assistance that are submitted to the Society by social workers in State agencies and other relevant bodies. We resolved at our strategy meeting that our procedures in dealing with applications for assistance should not be too difficult or off-putting for those making the applications on behalf of their clients, nor should we be too bureaucratic in processing the

applications. While mindful of the need for proper governance, we believe it is important to present a “welcoming face” towards all who approach us for assistance.

Moreover, we agreed at the strategy meeting to take positive steps to ensure the survival of the Society. The success of our efforts to control expenditure levels, as already outlined, has alleviated the problem in the short term – but it is not a long-term solution. We recognise that we need to be pro-active in seeking solutions, and accordingly we have adopted the slogan “Towards 2040” to provide a context for our thinking on this matter in the months ahead. The Society will be 250 years old in 2040, so that year – just over twenty years hence – will be a watershed moment for us. The aim of propelling the Society forward in good shape to 2040 is one which, I hope, will inspire us as members of the board. I am confident that we can secure the future of the Society by managing our affairs with prudence and by being modest in our expectations as regards the level of assistance that we can offer. We simply cannot afford to do big things, but we can make the world a much better place for lots of people in small ways.

The strategy meeting also made decisions of an operational and procedural nature which will, it is expected, enhance the effectiveness and smooth working of the Society. Our priority in providing assistance will remain to help people in temporary need to get back on their feet again through once-off assistance and be self-sustaining thereafter. Our perception is that, generally speaking, the assistance which we give in small amounts for this purpose is more efficacious euro-for-euro in relieving distress than the larger sums that are sometimes sought.

One of the concerns raised at the strategy meeting was that several bigger and more prominent charities regularly apply to the Society for assistance on behalf of their clients despite the fact that their own resources are in many instances more plentiful than ours. We resolved to contact some of the organisations in question to explore with them whether they could meet more of these needs themselves and so free up our funds for other less well-endowed organisations.

Likewise, we are repeatedly asked by the Health Service Executive (HSE) to make up shortfalls in the State’s provision through the HSE for those in need – often trivial amounts, in categories of assistance which appear not to fall within the strict funding criteria of the HSE. These criteria sometimes seem arbitrary and indeed inconsistent with the overall thrust of HSE policy. While the Society will always endeavour to help where we can, we nevertheless take the view that it is not appropriate for a small charity like ours to carry the burden of making good deficiencies in core public sector funding. It was agreed at the strategy meeting that I, as acting chairman, would write to the Minister for Health about this matter.

The Society was pleased to note the publication in 2018 of a biography of Fr John Spratt by Professor Fergus D’Arcy, formerly of UCD. Fr Spratt, a Carmelite friar, became joint honorary secretary of the Society in 1833 and served in that role for nearly forty years. The Society is proud to have a portrait of him hanging in our office. Professor D’Arcy correctly emphasises that Fr Spratt’s association with the Society showed “how interconfessional or ecumenical he was, uniquely for his age” – since the Society was then, as now, a strictly non-denominational body. Many of the social problems which confronted Fr Spratt in his work with the Society in the nineteenth century – problems of poverty, addiction and homelessness – are still with us today, and we deal with them every week in considering the applications for assistance that come to us.

My comments so far have referred to developments in 2018, but the accounts being presented to this AGM are for the calendar year 2017. They show that we distributed assistance of over €166,000 in 2017, as compared to €199,000 in 2016 and €178,000 in 2015 – reflecting the greater discipline introduced into our approvals process. The Society recorded a deficit of just over €60,000 in 2017, versus a deficit of €114,000 in 2016. We have administrative expenses of approximately €40,000 per annum. Our main source of funding is donations and bequests, and the Society wishes to express its thanks to Archbishop Diarmuid Martin for facilitating the annual church collection for the Society in a number of centre city parishes. The amount raised from this collection in 2017 was €16,500, down from €18,000 in 2016.

The Society is fully compliant with the governance code of the Charities Regulator, and we applaud the work of the Regulator in helping to restore public confidence in the charities sector in Ireland.

I have already thanked John Lynch for his work as chairman. I would now like to thank my fellow board members for their commitment to and dedicated work for the Society, especially Colette O’Daly and John Martin, who served as vice-chairman and company secretary respectively, and also the members of the finance sub-committee of the board under the chairmanship of Margaret Judge who make a vitally important contribution in monitoring the budget and keeping our investments under active review. The finance sub-committee made a significant input into the recent strategy meeting, and I wish to acknowledge that. I am happy to welcome two new directors who have joined the board since last year’s AGM, Michael Deasy and Aideen Ireland – and I hope that they will find their association with the Society as rewarding as I have.

Last but not least, I want to record our appreciation of the excellent support which we receive from the Society’s secretary and administrator, Vera Hussey. She is the “welcoming face” of the Society in our interface with those who make applications to us for assistance, and she continues to make a contribution to the work of the Society above and beyond the call of duty.

FELIX M. LARKIN

Acting Chairman

15 November 2018