

SICK AND INDIGENT ROOMKEEPERS' SOCIETY

229th Annual General Meeting – 21st November 2019

CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT

This statement is presented to the 229th Annual General Meeting of the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' Society. Founded in 1790 we are Dublin's oldest charity and the banner headline on our website reads 'Serving the poor of Dublin since 1790 and still serving'.

The meaning of our evocative title 'Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' is explained in the records of the first meeting of the eleven founders in 1790. Here they laid down that the recipients of relief 'shall be poor roomkeepers who never begged abroad and who by unforeseen misfortune, sickness, death of friends or other dispensations of Providence have been reduced to indigence' (D. Lindsay, *Dublin's Oldest Charity*, Dublin 1990, p. 3). The meaning of the word 'indigent' is described in *Webster's Dictionary* as 'a level of poverty in which real hardship and deprivation are suffered and comforts of life are wholly lacking'. Contemporaneous historical accounts describe the appalling conditions in which a great many of the city's poor lived, unable to find work or too ill to undertake it, thus confined by their unfortunate circumstances to their rooms in damp, miserable, overcrowded, and disease ridden buildings; hence the term 'roomkeepers'.

It has been a very busy year for the Society as we were obliged for only the third time since 1855 to move headquarters. The process of relocation in the present rental climate was a challenging one. I feel very privileged to welcome you all to this, the first meeting in our new office at no. 41 Fitzwilliam Square West, and we are very grateful to Rutherford Solicitors for the opportunity to relocate, at an affordable rate, to their premises here in the historic Mansion House Ward. Mr Derek Greenlee of Rutherford Solicitors was a former chairman and a long serving trustee of the Society. We thank him for retaining his interest in our charitable activities. I would also like to express our thanks to Protestant Aid who provided us with office space at 74 Upper Leeson Street for the past almost nine years in an environment with other charities, all seeking to address problems of poverty and deprivation. While space restrictions in our new office obliged the sale of our historic furniture, the proceeds of which will provide a valuable supplement to our income, we were pleased to have enough space in our new premises to retain the portraits of our founders and those active in the early years of the charity, such as Samuel Rosborough, a linen merchant, Fr. John Spratt, a Carmelite friar, and John Grehan, a carver and gilder.

When I first joined the Board of the Society in 2012 another long-term trustee, Paddy Mullins, recalled how he remembered physical aid being distributed through a hatch in the iconic building that the Society owned and occupied from 1855 to 1992 in Palace Street at the gates of Dublin Castle. Today the need for the assistance that the Society is in a position to grant is as great as ever, although the format of the aid and the means of distribution are different.

In 2018 the Society distributed assistance of €123,800 over 283 cases, out of a total of 368 applications processed by the trustees. This compares with €166,000 distributed over 431 cases from a total of 528 in 2017, and €199,236 distributed over 401 cases from a total of 441 cases in 2016. The decline in the amount distributed reflects the adherence to stricter guidelines that we have been obliged to introduce in our approvals process, mindful that our own resources are in a cycle of decline.

As a result of the depletion of our capital reserves, a major policy decision was taken this year in respect of three major charities, Dublin Simon, Focus Ireland, and the Peter McVerry Trust, which the Society had continually supported in the past. While we greatly respect the work of these charities, the Board reluctantly decided that we could no longer accept applications for assistance from these organizations due to the huge discrepancy in the funds available to our respective charities. Our intention is to divert our assistance to smaller charities that, while equally as deserving as the major ones, do not have the same level of funding.

We continue to adhere to the core principle of the Society which is to target assistance towards helping people who are experiencing temporary difficulties and in need of once-off assistance to restructure their lives and achieve or regain self-sufficiency. All applications up to €1,500 are reviewed by two trustees on a rotational basis and those above that figure are reviewed by the Board at their monthly meetings. All decisions are taken on a strictly non-denominational non-judgemental basis in accordance with the original ethos of the Society. Assistance distributed on a weekly basis is in the order of €2,000 and on a monthly basis, at Board meetings, in the order of €4,000. We respect the privacy of applicants and we consider the Society to be fully compliant with GDPR regulations in this regard. We hope that such modest assistance can make a real difference to people's lives. Sometimes it can be as simple as providing a bike to a parent to take a small child to school outside their catchment area, thereby enabling that parent to return quickly to a challenging home situation. Problems are usually multifaceted and small improvements in one area can ensure a knock-on improvement in another.

The Society sought to highlight deficiencies in core public funding in our letter (July 2019) to the Minister for Education in respect of the number of demands we were receiving for private SNA (Special Needs Assistance) assessments. These demands resulted from the unacceptable length of public waiting lists. We highlighted that such delays deprive children of educational opportunity, concluding with the sentence that 'meeting the needs of children should not depend on charity'.

Investments are made on the recommendation of the Finance Sub-Committee and approved by the Board. I am grateful to that team of Michael Deasy, John Martin, and John MacClancy under the chairmanship of Margaret Judge, for their continual vigilance regarding our investment portfolio, the preparation of the annual budget and, in particular this year, for their work on the production of an *Internal Audit Control Manual* that was approved by the Board at our meeting on May 16th 2019. This action was in response to the publication of the *Internal Financial Controls Guidelines* by the Charities Regulator in June 2017. The Society is very conscious of our responsibilities regarding the Governance Code of the Charities Regulator and, on November 2nd 2019, held a strategy meeting to engage with the process of completing the required Charities Governance Compliance Record Form.

Our main source of funding remains charitable donations and bequests, and mindful of this a 'Donor's Charter' has been drawn up and added to our website. The Society wishes to express its thanks to Archbishop Diarmuid Martin for facilitating the annual church collection for the Society in the parishes within the canals. This area represented the traditional boundaries within which the Society carried out its relief work, an area that now unfortunately only represents 18% of the parishes located within the city and county of Dublin that we serve. Moreover, the amount raised from this collection in 2018 was €14,886, down from €16,500 in 2017.

Felix Larkin continued to highlight the profile of the Society in an interview published in thejournal.ie on the night of December 25th 2018, which has had 24,379 views to date.

As this year draws to a close, I want to thank my colleagues, Felix Larkin, past Chairman, and John Martin, Vice-Chairman for their invaluable assistance in our relocation process, our secretary, Vera Hussey, for her continual commitment, flexibility, and genuine empathy towards the work of the Society and all my fellow trustees for their time and non-judgemental assistance in helping to continue to fulfil our mission to serve the poor of Dublin 'Towards 2040' and beyond.

Colette O'Daly
Chairman
21st November 2019