

## SICK AND INDIGENT ROOMKEEPERS' SOCIETY

230<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting – 19<sup>th</sup> November 2020

### CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT

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This statement is presented to the 230<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting of the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' Society, Dublin's oldest charity, founded in 1790. The banner headline on our website reads 'Serving the poor of Dublin since 1790 and still serving'.

The year 2020 has brought unprecedented challenges to life in Ireland. It is notable however that the Sick & Indigent Roomkeepers were also operating in turbulent circumstances one hundred years ago. In December 1920, a Military Curfew Order was imposed on the city, and the Society, in order to ensure an adequate attendance for the business of their monthly meeting of 3<sup>rd</sup> December, held a special meeting at the earlier time of five o'clock that evening to allow time for those attending to reach their homes before the 8pm curfew. The non-political principle of the Roomkeepers' Society, that precludes any discussion of religious or political subjects at their meetings, is evidenced by the Annual Reports of these years, apart from voicing concern as to how the poor were being affected in a particular situation. The Society was suffering from increasing strain on their resources due to the increased demands and added financial pressures occasioned by the aftermath of the Great War, political turbulence from heightened nationalistic activities, and the effects of the influenza epidemic of 1918. Dr Ida Milne, a social historian and expert on the historical impact of infectious diseases, records that the epidemic '*killed upwards of 50 million people and probably infected one third of the world's population*'. (I. Milne, *Pandemic in Ireland One Hundred Years Ago through the Lens of the Church of Ireland Gazette*, July 2020).

The response of the Society to its financial situation was to discard the option of selling any more of the Society's investment stock until there was an improvement in the market and to propose that the Society appeal to the public through a 'flag day', to be held on Whit Saturday, 7th June 1919. For this purpose they devised a pamphlet setting out the Society's aims, objects, and work for the information of the public. An account is given by Deirdre Lindsay that '*The newspapers were almost saturated with Roomkeepers' appeals in the few days preceding the flag day appeal. One of the most obvious features of this advertising is what seems to be the influence of war propaganda on the form and tone of the advertisements. The reader is addressed directly and authoritatively, READ THIS!*' (D. Lindsay, *Dublin's Oldest Charity*, Dublin 1990, p. 85). The Society was praised for its work at the time in the context of appealing for funds. '*The Rector of the inner-city parish of St Thomas, the Revd. E. G. Burland praised its help to him in saving the lives of many family breadwinners*'. (I. Milne, *Pandemic in Ireland One Hundred Years Ago through the Lens of the Church of Ireland Gazette*, July 2020). The flag day itself passed off successfully and any expenditure was fully justified by the income generated through the appeal which amounted to £1,141.

As the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' Society, a strictly non-denominational, non-sectarian charity enters its 230<sup>th</sup> year of existence, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are now celebrating 175 years since it was established in Ireland in Charles Street West, coincidentally in the same street where our founder, Samuel Rosborough, also resided. It is a measure of the co-operation between the two charities, that shared a common objective of seeking to assist the poor, that the St. Vincent de Paul Society supplied the names of five hundred ladies who, having acted in the

same capacity for them, were willing to collect for the Roomkeepers' Society on their flag day in 1919.

In a similar vein, at a lecture entitled *A true Dubliner: Fr. John Spratt, O. Carm. 1796 – 1871*, organised by the Old Dublin Society on February 12<sup>th</sup> 2020, and which was attended by several of our Directors, Professor Fergus D'Arcy emphasised that Fr. Spratt, who was joint secretary of the Roomkeepers' Society from 1833–1871, was remarkable for his ecumenism in an era of great sectarianism in Dublin. Fr. Spratt was a founder or lead figure in over forty organisations thereby making a great contribution to the cultural and humane life of the city, while also being an ardent campaigner for issues as diverse as the abolition of capital punishment, the establishment of St Joseph's Night Shelter for Homeless Poor in Cork Street, to the opening up of the Botanic Gardens and St Stephen's Green.

Today's difficult economic climate in Ireland and the continuing impact of COVID-19 has inevitably resulted in a decline in the charity's income and a reduction in the value of our investments. The Society wishes to express its thanks to Archbishop Diarmuid Martin for facilitating the annual church collection for the Society in 2019 in the parishes within the canals. This area represents the traditional boundaries within which the Society originally carried out its relief work, an area that now unfortunately represents only 18% of the parishes located within the City and County of Dublin that we serve. The amount raised from this collection in 2019 was €16,951, up from €14,886 in 2018. An annual donation of €500 is also gratefully acknowledged by the Society from St. Patrick's Cathedral *'in recognition of our support to the community in so many ways'*. The Society received €18,574 by way of bequests in 2019 plus €11,119 from other donations. It is very gratifying to think that bequests come from all over the country in recognition of the long history of the Society as a charitable institution.

In 2019 the Society distributed assistance of €128,343 over 303 cases out of a total of 376 applications processed by the trustees. This compares with €123,867 distributed over 283 cases from a total of 368 in 2018, and €166,000 distributed over 431 cases from a total of 528 cases in 2017. The decline in the amount distributed from that of 2017 reflects the adherence to stricter guidelines that we have been obliged to introduce in our approvals process since 2017 mindful that our own resources are in a cycle of decline.

Financial investments are approved by the Board on the recommendation of the Society's Finance Sub-Committee. 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 and the preparation of the annual budget. An audited Financial Statement for the year 2019 is available to view under the 'Governance' section on our website [www.roomkeepers.com](http://www.roomkeepers.com)

It is now one year since we moved to our new office at 41 Fitzwilliam Square. Throughout the pandemic and the challenges that it has brought it was very reassuring to have the security of a stable office environment. Unfortunately, the office has suffered enforced periodic closure for a five-month period due to Government restrictions in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. This has affected the amount of assistance that we have been able to grant, compounded by a reduction in the number of applications we have received from social workers who, themselves, are limited in their referrals to us on account of the difficulties they have encountered in keeping in contact with their own clients. The monthly meetings of the Society have continued to be held since June 2020 by means of electronic technology (Zoom). However, reviewing larger grant applications over €1,500 has not been possible because of the confidential nature of such material, combined with our own inability to hold inter-corporeal meetings since February due to necessary social-distancing measures. Notwithstanding these present limitations, a most reassuring letter was

received in September 2020 in response to assistance that we had provided earlier in the year towards the provision of a stair lift. It came from a mother of a young person recovering from serious surgery; her letter recounts how *'Your organisation has transformed both the life of our daughter and that of our family'*.

We continued 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. Accordingly, we were pleased to be able to assist with home start-ups, educational expenses, utility bills, sensory aids for autistic children, together with the provision of assistance for the purchase of food and clothing by means of vouchers. We receive applications on a continuous basis to fund assessments by Occupational Therapists, an initial requirement in the qualification process in applying for Government Grants to cover house adaptations. While we are prepared to assist with these cases, it seems unjust that the needs of older people in vulnerable situations should have to depend on charity to engage an Occupational Therapist. The Society intends to highlight this deficiency with the appropriate authority.

In keeping with the requirements of the Charities Regulator relating to the Charities Corporate Code, the Society completed the Charities Governance Code Compliance Record form during the year. Arising from its obligations under the Code, the Society is proposing amendments to its *Memorandum and Articles of Association*, for adoption at this year's AGM, to provide for rules dealing with *Conflicts of Interest* and the *Rotation of Directors* in line with current best practice. The Society has devised a *Policy Statement on Conflicts of Interest*, including the introduction of a register to record any such conflicts. A *Code of Conduct for Directors* was adopted at our meeting on July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020, which has been signed by all current Board members and will be signed by any new Director on their accepted nomination. A Governance Sub-Committee is currently undertaking work on the introduction of a *Risk Register*, under the chairpersonship of Michael Deasy. I am especially grateful to Michael, and other Board members, including Margaret Judge, John Martin, Felix Larkin, and Siobhán Fitzpatrick, all of whom have worked diligently on these governance issues at various stages throughout the year ensuring that we fulfil our responsibilities in the area of corporate governance and that our charity remains managed in an accountable and transparent way.

It is with great regret that we learned in March 2020 of the death of Mr Paul Deegan, a long serving and valued member of the Board, who had resigned in 2015. Paul was instrumental in the restoration of the memorial honouring our founder Samuel Rosborough at St Michan's Church.

I warmly welcome our new Director, Ms Siobhán Fitzpatrick, who joined the Board in June of this year; I hope that she will find the work of the Society to be a rewarding and fulfilling experience.

As this challenging year draws to a close, I wish to thank my colleagues, John Martin - Vice-Chairman, Felix Larkin - past Chairman, Roger McCormack - Company Secretary, for their invaluable advice at all times, also John MacClancy for monitoring our insurance responsibilities, and our secretary, Vera Hussey, for her continual commitment and genuine empathy. Finally, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all my fellow Directors for their compassionate commitment to the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' Society in continuing to fulfil our core mission which is to serve the poor of Dublin 'Towards 2040' and beyond.

Colette O'Daly  
Chairman

19th November 2020