

SICK AND INDIGENT ROOMKEEPERS SOCIETY

226th Annual General Meeting – 8th December 2016

CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT

This statement is presented to the 226th Annual General Meeting of the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers Society.

I have been chair of the Society for the past four years, and I think it is the right time to pass on the baton to another. I have served as chair for longer than either of my two immediate predecessors. Every healthy organisation needs to be refreshed from time to time, and it is now opportune for a new chair to bring new ideas and a new enthusiasm to leading the Society – especially since we, like all charities in Ireland, face some very challenging circumstances. I am honoured to have served as chair of the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers Society, Dublin's oldest charity; as a historian, being associated with such a venerable body has always meant a lot to me. In stepping down from the chair, I would like to remember especially our former chair and my very good friend, the late Gerard Haugh, who invited me to join the board in 2008. I am sure he never expected that I would be his successor but one – nor indeed did I expect that – but, as chair, I have always been mindful of the trust that he placed in me by inviting me to join the board. I hope that I have lived up to that trust, and that I can continue to do so. I propose to remain as an ordinary member of the board, at least until I am due to retire by rotation under Article 30 of our Articles of Association.

We are, as I have said, Dublin's oldest charity, and it is worth noting that the types of poverty which the Society's founders, Samuel Rosborough and his associates, identified and tried to address through the establishment of the Society in 1790 continue to be a priority for us – namely, poverty due to illness, unemployment, addiction and other unforeseen circumstances. The need for the assistance which we are in a position to give is as great as ever. A core principle of the Society is to target assistance towards helping people who are experiencing temporary difficulties and need once-off assistance to help them to get back on a sound footing again. The Society's operations are restricted to the city and county of Dublin, and we disregard all distinctions of race, gender, religion or other creed in discharging our functions. Applications for assistance are made to the Society by social workers in State agencies and other relevant bodies.

I referred earlier to the challenging circumstances which charities in Ireland are facing. This is the result of a variety of issues – most especially, increased demands in our post-Celtic Tiger society and reduced investment income in the current economic environment. The board felt, in these circumstances, that it was necessary to stand back briefly from its day-to-day concerns during the past year and to reflect on the Society's present situation. Accordingly we arranged for a full strategy review of our operations in October. Significant decisions, mostly of an operational nature, were made as a result of this review. There is no need to list them all here. Suffice it to say that the board confirmed that our priority should continue to be helping people to get back on their feet again and be self-sustaining – for example, by clearing utility bill arrears and giving once-off assistance for food and clothing by means of vouchers. So as to give the Society a better overall sense of direction in our

future work, it was agreed that we would plan within our annual budget for the allocation of assistance to specified categories. The allocations agreed are 40% for short-term assistance, 20% for education-related, 20% for housing start-up expenses, and 20% unallocated and to be applied for any purpose (including something falling within the other three categories). There was general agreement among board members that we have the right balance at present between our disbursement of funds and retaining reserves in order to provide for the future work of the Society – and general agreement also that the relief which we give in small amounts is often more efficacious euro-for-euro in relieving distress than the larger sums which are sometimes sought.

One area of great concern to me and to the other members of the board is the housing crisis in Dublin. The extent of the crisis is widely recognised, and the Society has direct evidence of it through the very large number of applications we have received for assistance towards securing private rented accommodation. As a matter of policy, we have not assisted with rent arrears for many years, and only in limited cases have we given assistance towards rental deposits or rent in advance for the first month of a tenancy. In recent times, we have been deluged with applications for deposits and advances of rent – to the extent that, if we had agreed to all of them, the resources of the Society would quickly have been exhausted. Reluctantly, but necessarily, we decided in our strategy review to refuse all such applications in future. The rationale for this is that, by accepting these applications, we are only making good a deficiency in public sector policy on housing; the housing crisis needs to be addressed at political level, and it is not appropriate for a small charity like ourselves to become involved. The particular problem that has given rise to so many applications to the Society is that, whereas rent supplement is paid in arrears, most private sector landlords insist on rent being paid in advance; we are asked to bridge that gap. There is no reason why the relevant government authorities should not address this issue: it involves no net *additional* payment from State sources, but is simply a question of the timing of a payment which will eventually be made. We concluded that it was wrong to continue to apply some of the Society's limited resources to cover this anomaly. We will, however, continue to help with home start-ups – for example, by providing assistance for essential furniture, floor covering and white goods.

With the exception of applications for rental deposits and advances of rent, the Society – despite our funding challenges – has not had to refuse any qualifying application because of lack of funds. This is a source of great satisfaction to the board. Our accounts for the calendar year 2015 show that we distributed €178,000 in assistance in that year. That compares to almost €200,000 in 2014, about €150,000 in 2013 and about €121,000 in 2012. The peak in 2014 was largely due to the applications for rental deposits and advances of rent. Note also that the Society recorded an operating deficit of almost €65,000 in 2015, as compared to a deficit of €107,000 in 2014; the reason for the decline in the deficit was substantially higher revenue from bequests in 2015.

I have spoken about our funding challenges, which are largely a function of the fact that investment returns generally are very low. That is the bad news. The good news is that we continue to attract a very gratifying level of donations and bequests, without which we could not survive. We also benefit from an annual church collection in a number of centre city parishes. The amount thus collected in 2015 was over €18,000, similar to the figure for the previous year (€19,700). The Society wishes to express its thanks to Archbishop Diarmuid Martin for facilitating this collection. One of the decisions made during our strategy review was to establish a fundraising subcommittee, and this will start work next year; I wish it well in its important endeavours.

During the past year, the subcommittee which has been revamping the Society's website has completed its work – and I think it is fair to say that the Board is immensely proud of the excellent job that they did on our behalf. Our Society now presents a very attractive and modern face to the world through its website, one that is already heightening the Society's profile – enabling us to reach out and offer assistance to more people, while helping us to attract increased levels of donations. Since our website went live at the end of July, we have received 1,215 new visitors; approximately 85% of these accessed the website from Ireland and the UK, and 245 visitors accessed the website more than once. I want to thank the members of the subcommittee – Colette O'Daly (chair), David Thomas and Roger McCormack – for their great work on this project.

I wish to thank also the finance subcommittee for their on-going work in monitoring the budget and keeping our investment strategy under active review during the year. The sub-committee is chaired by our company secretary, Ken Langan, and the other board members who have served on the subcommittee during the past year are John McClancy, Stephen Wynne, Lynda Murphy and John Lynch.

It was with great regret that I learned that Ken Langan had decided not to seek re-election to the board at this AGM. Ken is one of the two longest-serving members of the board, and has served both as vice-chair and as company secretary – as well as chairing the finance sub-committee. He has been of enormous assistance to me during my four years as chairman, and all of us will miss his great experience and wise counsel. Stephen Wynne, who has been a very diligent board member for nearly ten years, is also stepping down. During the year, Lynda Murphy and Lucy Courlander both resigned. I thank all four for their service to the Society. I want to thank also my other fellow directors for their continued commitment to the Society, and I must especially acknowledge the support of John Lynch (vice-chairman) and Vera Hussey, our very dedicated secretary/administrator. Our board will now comprise eight members, which is the minimum prescribed in our Articles of Association; it is intended that some additional directors will be appointed in the coming months.

My final word as chair is to hope that the Society will long survive to continue the good work which it has done since 1790. I am confident that we can do this 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 knowledge that we are making a difference for people in difficulty – people who are sick or indigent, or both – is the priceless return which we, as directors of this Society, derive from the time and effort which we give to it on a strictly voluntary basis.

FELIX M. LARKIN
Chairman
8 December 2016