

Scouting Ireland the future – a proposal by the Chief Scout and former Chief Scouts

Open letter to the Board of Directors and Members of Scouting Ireland

Introduction

We must recognise that we are in extraordinary times that require extraordinary responses if Scouting Ireland is to survive. We need to respond in a unified and true scouting manner.

As we all know Ireland has been struggling to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic and Scouting Ireland has been struggling too. Whilst a number of our Scout Groups have managed to cope and deliver a modified scout programme in accordance with Government guidelines a significant number of Scout Groups have and continue to struggle to deliver a scout programme given the difficulties caused by the pandemic.

In addition to those problems Scout Groups are being asked to comply with Scouting Ireland census and registration procedures, including payment of fees, as well as dealing with parents in unprecedented circumstances and uncertainty about when a full scouting programme can be implemented safely. Scout Groups are also being told to prepare for Charity Regulatory Authority (CRA) registration in the Republic of Ireland.

To help and support Scout Groups to cope it is essential that all these matters are prioritised and that each and every Scout Group is provided with specifically tailored support to enable them to deal with all these matters effectively.

We recognise that a considerable number of our members have concerns on a variety of issues as indeed we as former Chief Scouts do too.

However, in order to ensure the very survival of our Movement all of these must be put on hold for now. There will be time enough to revisit these issues at a future date, if necessary, but right now we need a cohesive strategy to support our Scout Groups over the coming months in order to resume “normal scouting activities” as soon as practicable.

The recent clarification from the Chairperson of the Board regarding the separation of the annual membership census and the payment of registration fees is to be welcomed. However, this must be accompanied by a genuine effort to liaise with each and every Scout Group to determine what supports they need in order to be able to resume normal scouting activities and how and when they will be able to pay registration fees.

This will require a refocussing of support by all Scouting Ireland staff both paid and volunteer at National, Provincial and Scout County levels to meet with Scout Groups to identify and deliver appropriate support.

The Board must set the direction for this and the CEO will have the responsibility to lead the delivery of the necessary support that each and every Scout Group needs in these difficult and uncertain times. The Board needs to set a realistic and achievable deadline for completion of this work, e.g. end of August 2021, so that we can be fully prepared for the start of the new 2021\2022 scout year.

There is no doubt that implementing the actions we propose below will be difficult and will cause issues particularly for the Board of Directors. **We have no intention whatsoever of trying to undermine the Board but are simply making suggestions as to how our Movement can work in a collegiate manner to ensure its survival.**

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Proposed Actions

- We must put any differences and issues we have to one side for now in order to work in concert with each other to tackle the problems we are facing. We have proven over the years that when we work together with a shared sense of purpose we can achieve amazing results and the current situation our Movement finds itself in, requires us to do so again.
- The Board must set the direction for this and the CEO will have the responsibility to lead the delivery of the necessary support that each and every Scout Group needs in these difficult and uncertain times.
- The Chief Scout should resume his duties immediately to work in conjunction with the Board of Directors, the CEO, paid and volunteer staff and Provincial and County Teams in order to reassure and support Scout Groups in dealing with the difficulties currently being experienced.
- The Board of Directors and the CEO must urgently liaise with the Minister and DCYA to spell out the difficulties Scouting Ireland is facing and fully explain the strategy being implemented and the key role the Chief Scout must play.
- The Board should also seek additional government financial support to help Scouting Ireland to implement whatever initiatives are necessary to return to full Youth Programme operations as soon as practicable.
- Given the issues that need to be addressed in the coming months that the AGM and elections due to be held in April 2021 should be deferred until September or October.
- The Board should consider agreeing with the CRA to defer commencement of Scout Group registration in the Republic of Ireland until at least October 2021.
- Throughout 2021 there should be a monthly bulletin issued to provide timely updates on progress and remaining or newly identified difficulties.
- Preparations should commence shortly to hold Provincial Scouters and Scout Conferences in July or August 2021. This would result in a more collegiate approach in dealing with issues and exchanging views and should in due course reduce the amount of rhetoric posted on social media.
- All Members should be more careful and considerate whilst using social media. The Scouters and Scout Conferences and access to the Chief Scout and his Team will help with this.

Governance

It has to be recognised that the Board of Directors have been working hard since the EGM held in October 2018 to address the governance changes required in Scouting Ireland.

They have done so whilst faced with unprecedented and uncharted difficulties. Significant progress has been made with Departments restructured and with an updated Safeguarding policy, procedures and practices put in place.

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However, there are significant gaps in the national structure that was envisaged by the Governance Proposals approved by National Council in October 2018. An oversight Board, Operational Departments, Provincial and County Commissioners are in place but there are at least two major vital elements missing:

- Provincial and National Scouters and Scouts Conferences;
- The Chief Scout.

Provincial and National Conferences

The Governance Proposals envisaged that in addition to general meetings of the company there would be a Scouters and Scouts Conference held in each Province at least once a year. This would provide opportunities to receive information from SI Department Heads and to have much needed debate on whatever issues Scouters wished. Provision was also made for a National Scouters and Scouts Conference if one was needed.

We believe preparations should commence shortly to hold Provincial Conferences in July or August 2021. In our view this would result in a more collegiate approach in dealing with issues and exchanging views and should in due course reduce the amount of rhetoric posted on social media.

The Chief Scout

As set out in the Governance Proposals the Chief Scout is the inspirational leader of Scouting Ireland. It is a voluntary role and is the highest elected position in Scouting Ireland. It is an office of great honour and history in Irish Scouting and it goes all the way back to the first Chief Scout, Robert Baden Powell. The role includes senior administrative duties for the Company and ceremonial obligations towards youth members in terms of the Youth Programme Awards & achievements and Adult Awards & distinctions.

The Chief Scout is the chairperson of the General Meetings of the Company. He/she may also chair other meetings or conferences from time to time as appropriate, such as the National Youth Assembly. The Chief Scout will also be chairperson of the Motions Committee which will examine motions received by members for consideration at the AGM and will be assisted by two others none of whom may be directors of the company.

The role of the Chief Scout will require regular interaction with Scouts and Scouters throughout the island. He/she will represent Scouting Ireland at home and abroad. He/she will be supported by a dedicated team of staff.

The Chief Scout is not a Director of the Company but the Board will consult with him/her on an constant basis. As such he/she will have to attend Board meetings as often as necessary to discharge his/her responsibilities and to make and receive reports.

The Chief Scout and the Board will work together to be guardians of the Scout Promise & Law with the responsibility to ensure that all within Scouting Ireland are true to the Scout Principles and Method and endeavour to live the Scout Law and Promise.

In this time of crisis for our Movement we must have an active Chief Scout in place to carry out the functions of that office and to support and encourage all of our members to work cohesively in concert with the Board of Directors and our paid and volunteer staff so that Scouting Ireland can survive.

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The Chief Scouts Team

It was envisaged that the Chief Scout would be supported by a dedicated team of staff. The team will need to be strengthened further by the addition of a number of volunteers to assist him with his duties including, scouter representation etc. We the former Chief Scouts will assist him in any way that we can.

The Chief Scout will be establishing a subset of his/her team to, in the first instance, support and represent volunteer Scouters in Ireland. This group will also offer advice and potentially advocate for and/or represent the interests of individual scouter volunteers who find themselves in dispute with Scouting Ireland.

Such a group is necessary because for some time it is evident that the disputes resolution process within Scouting Ireland is unfit for purpose with those accused of inappropriate behaviour etc being provided with little or no support to state their case and defend themselves.

The disciplinary process appears to be unnecessarily adversarial it does not offer a fair, transparent or independently overseen route to dispute resolution from a volunteers perspective.

So if you are a volunteer scouter and you want someone in your corner, should you end up in a dispute with Scouting Ireland, particularly one that was not of your making - you can contact the Chief Scouts Team for help and support.

Paid staff are, quite rightly, afforded a full set of protections under the various employment acts, through their membership of a union, the presence of a shop steward. In addition, professional staff enjoy the unconditional support of the Chief Executive Officer and Board of Scouting Ireland. Consequently, they will not be able to avail of this initiative.

The Lorna Lynch Report

This issue has been dragging on for far too long and has and continues to damage Scouting Ireland and needs to be finalised urgently.

In early 2018 the National Management Committee of Scouting Ireland resolved to appoint Lorna Lynch BL to conduct an investigation as to whether an NMC Member, the two Chief Commissioners and the Chief Scout acted appropriately in relation to a Complaint, including without prejudice to the generality of the investigation, whether they inappropriately contacted the staff involved in managing the Complaint seeking to exert influence in favour of the person who was the subject of the Complaint.

In April 2018 the four respondents, as they became known, all voluntarily stepped aside from their roles for the duration of the investigation which was initially expected to take about six weeks.

Ms Lynch set out the details of her investigation and findings in a report of about 60 pages that was delivered in January 2019. We are summarising the findings regarding the Chief Scout and the two Chief Commissioners as follows:

- The Chief Scout did not act appropriately when meeting with the subject of the Complaint in January 2017 and in failing to disclose at a Board meeting in February 2017 the fact and/or details of his meeting with the subject of the Complaint;
- There were no findings that the Chief Scout inappropriately contacted the staff involved in managing the Complaint seeking to exert influence in favour of the person who was the subject of the Complaint;

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- The CCAR did not act appropriately in relation to the Complaint during a Child Protection Management Team (CPMT) conference call in July 2016 where, although she considered herself conflicted and did not vote during the meeting, she participated in the discussion of the Complaint and expressed her view that it was not appropriate for the CPMT to deal with the Complaint and that she failed, as Chair of the CPMT, to bring the issue forward to the Board at a meeting held in July 2016;
- There were no other findings, that the CCAR did not act appropriately in relation to the Complaint or that she inappropriately contacted the staff involved in managing the Complaint seeking to exert influence in favour of the person who was the subject of the Complaint;
- The CCYP did not act appropriately in relation to the Complaint during the CPMT conference call in July 2016 in circumstances where he was conflicted by virtue of a friendship with the subject of the Complaint and he did not act appropriately in relation to the Complaint by requesting the Chief Scout to meet with the subject of the Complaint;
- There were no other findings, that the CCYP did not act appropriately in relation to the Complaint or that he inappropriately contacted the staff involved in managing the Complaint seeking to exert influence in favour of the person who was the subject of the Complaint.

Following receipt of this report it was decided, based on legal advice, that it fell under the remit of the NMC rather than the Board of Directors. We understand that the NMC considered the report and eventually appointed a subcommittee to determine what disciplinary action should be taken regarding the four respondents. We understand that the subcommittee decided that the Chief Scout and the two Chief Commissioners should be suspended from office until the next general meeting of the National Council. We understand that this decision was appealed and that the National Secretary appointed himself to hear the appeal. He decided to uphold the decision of the subcommittee. No date has yet been set for a general meeting of National Council.

Having considered the findings of Ms Lynch it is contended that the amount of time that the CS and CC's have been inactive in their roles should be deemed to be sufficient punishment for not acting appropriately. Consequently, they should be allowed to resume their roles immediately.

There is no doubt that this will present difficulty for the Board of Directors particularly given their dealings with DCYA and former Minister Zappone. However, we believe it is vital that the Chief Scout can join with the Board and others to galvanise our members in these troubled times.

The Association

Closing down the Association is important and should be completed as soon as possible, however, given the extraordinary difficulties being faced by Scouting Ireland now on this matter should not be prioritised ahead of the actions proposed above.

Conclusion

We are very concerned for the future of our Movement and taking appropriate action in the coming months will determine whether or not it will survive.

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It is essential that all elements of Scouting Ireland work cohesively with the Board setting the direction and the CEO, Provincial & County Commissioners and Chief Scout helping Scout Groups to implement actions appropriate to each Individual Scout Group.

Yours in Scouting

Christy McCann, Ken Ramsey, Donald Harvey, Martin Burbridge

Chief Scouts

11 December 2020