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Scouting Ireland thrown into fresh crisis after years trying to piece itself back together

Youth organisation accused of ‘critical vetting failure’ over training course including unvetted adults

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Internal divisions within Scouting Ireland and allegations of current child-protection shortcomings made by two board members have thrown the youth organisation into a fresh governance crisis.

The organisation is grappling with charges made by two directors and a separate dispute over a recent vetting “failure”, as well as a clash involving the former board of a Northern Ireland offshoot.

Scouting Ireland has spent the last four years trying to piece itself back together after major controversy threatened to destroy the organisation. Following reporting by The Irish Times into the flawed handling of a serious sexual assault allegation concerning two adult volunteers, the organisation’s State funding was temporarily suspended and its entire board stepped down in 2018.

Amid that turmoil, the organisation faced a reckoning over historical child sexual abuse in the Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland and Scout Association of Ireland, which merged to form Scouting Ireland in 2004. More than 350 survivors came forward to disclose being abused as children in the predecessor associations. A report by child protection expert Ian Elliott concluded the abuse was tolerated at the highest levels of the former bodies and covered up for decades.

Membership of the youth organisation fell from 50,000 prior to the scandal to about 35,000 last year, before recently climbing back towards 40,000 members.

Now two members of its current board have sparked a new wave of turmoil, alleging the “integrity” of child-protection standards in the youth organisation is in “jeopardy”.

The directors, Donnachadha Reynolds (50) and Jacques Kinane (25), prepared a November 7th, 2023, briefing document for two Sinn Féin TDs, Kathleen Funchion and Pearse Doherty.

Setting out a series of highly-charged claims, the briefing stated Scouting Ireland’s board had been beset by “terrible infighting”. The directors alleged they had attempted to raise concerns a report about the “handling of a paedophile” had not had not been “appropriately investigated” by the organisation.

The directors said they also had concerns about signing off on the organisation’s financial accounts, due to fears that more than 50 High Court cases being taken by abuse survivors seeking compensation could lead to a possible “wipeout”.

The briefing stated Mr Reynolds had been suspended as a board member, following a clash with Joe Marken, Scouting Ireland’s interim chief executive, during a board meeting last June. The document stated another director had asked for the meeting to be adjourned due to the “level of aggression” in exchanges.

The briefing was sent to the wider board on November 19th, at which point Mr Marken shared it with the Department of Children, the organisation’s main public funder. A department spokesman said officials were “reviewing” the allegations made by the two directors and had met Mr Reynolds and Mr Kinane last month.

Mr Reynolds said he could not comment on the claims made in the document or his suspension, while Mr Kinane did not respond to requests for comment.

Besides the bitter dispute involving the two directors and the wider board, internal documents, emails and memos show the organisation faces divisions on a number of other fronts

Scouting Ireland has responded forcefully to the allegations. The organisation said the claims made in the document were “without merit” and seemed “designed to undermine the progressive work” of the organisation and damage its reputation.

“The board of Scouting Ireland operates in a professional manner and strongly rejects any suggestions to the contrary,” it said. It said it rejected “in the strongest possible terms” the claim a safeguarding issue had not been appropriately investigated, criticising the allegation as “without foundation”.

Besides the bitter dispute involving the two directors and the wider board, internal documents, emails and memos show the organisation faces divisions on a number of other fronts.

Last September it moved against the board of the Scout Foundation NI (SFNI), a Belfast-based offshoot set up to support scout groups in Northern Ireland and Co Donegal.

The board of Scouting Ireland voted to remove six of the eight directors of the northern arm of the all-island organisation, according to a statement by the ousted group. The six directors included two former senior members of the national board replaced in 2018, former interim chair Annette Byrne and former national secretary Charlie McGuinness.

The former SFNI directors said the decision to remove them followed a “review” by Scouting Ireland, on foot of friction between the two boards in recent years. The group criticised the manner of their removal as “disturbing”.

A spokeswoman for Scouting Ireland said the board of SFNI had been replaced in early October in line with “good corporate governance”.

Documents show the two boards had previously clashed over a training course in Co Donegal for adults volunteering to become scout leaders.

A scout group had sought training for about 20 adults in late 2022; however, there were delays receiving Garda vetting approval for several of the prospective leaders. A volunteer who co-ordinates training in the region raised concerns over the vetting issue and cancelled the course.

The national board overruled the decision and agreed the training should go ahead, according to an internal memo prepared by Mr Marken.

The dispute over the training course was brought to the attention of Minister for Children Roderic O’Gorman by Fine Gael TD Alan Farrell in October

In a February 19th, 2023, email, the training co-ordinator said she feared she would have left herself open to training “someone who has a criminal record”, if she had proceeded with the course. In response, Ned Brennan, chair of Scouting Ireland’s board, suggested the volunteer meet Steven Maclean, the organisation’s safeguarding full-time manager, but the offer was not taken up.

In a further March 1st email, the co-ordinator said if the board did not respond to her concerns, she would “be left with no other option but to contact statutory agencies.”

Mr Maclean urged the volunteer to meet him before contacting outside authorities. He said based on current information there was “no rationale” to refer the matter to statutory agencies. “If there is something I have missed, I will send the report myself,” he wrote.

In April 6th, 2023, correspondence, Mr McGuinness, former national secretary, said he felt the board’s delay in responding to issues raised by the volunteer was of “grave concern”.

The board of SFNI also raised concerns the course had gone ahead, taking the view that the inclusion of unvetted adults represented a “critical vetting failure”.

In response to the criticism, Mr Maclean and another senior manager carried out an internal review, which was completed in June 2023.

The report found that an initial list of volunteers due to take part in the training incorrectly stated they had all been vetted prior to attending. It concluded that this was the result of “an isolated administrative error”, which did not “constitute a ‘systematic failure’”. The report said measures would be put in place with “immediate effect” so that the error could not happen again.

The dispute over the training course was brought to the attention of Minister for Children Roderic O’Gorman by Fine Gael TD Alan Farrell in October. Internal department emails, released under the Freedom of Information Act, show Mr O’Gorman wanted the matter investigated as a “priority”.

In a November 27th response, Mr O’Gorman said he was satisfied adults who attended the training did not begin volunteering in scout groups until their Garda vetting had been completed.

Separately, Scouting Ireland also risked a delay in receiving its annual grant of €1.3 million from the department, as it was late submitting accounts covering 2022. In a November 17th, 2023, letter to the department, Mr Brennan apologised for the delay furnishing the accounts, stating their auditors Grant Thornton had not completed their review of the figures.

Due to the delay the organisation had to push its annual general meeting (AGM) back from September 2023 to February 2024. A spokeswoman for Scouting Ireland said the organisation submitted the accounts to the department on December 22nd.

The financial accounts for 2022, circulated to rank and file members on Friday, state the estimated liabilities the organisation was facing from legal cases taken by abuse survivors had increased to €7.4 million.

This prompted a detailed analysis of its financial stability going forward, which included examining the timing of “likely legal settlements”. It included an assessment of potential outcomes from an ongoing arbitration process with insurer Allianz, who are disputing aspects of their liability to cover the cost of settlements over past abuse. The accounts stated that “a majority” of directors agreed the organisation would be able to meet its liabilities for a “minimum period” of up to January 2025.

The organisation may face further scrutiny over the recent turmoil, as it is understood politicians are seeking to invite Scouting Ireland to come before the Oireachtas children’s committee to take questions in the first months of this year.