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Scouting Ireland directors say their removal would be attempt to silence whistleblowers

Donnachadha Reynolds and Jacques Kinane claim 'integrity' of child protection standards in the organisation in 'jeopardy' due to infighting among directors

Delegates from scouting groups will vote on two motions to remove the board members at an EGM on Sunday

The board of Scouting Ireland has moved to oust two directors who previously claimed that infighting among board members at the youth organisation jeopardised the integrity of its child protection standards.

The Scouting Ireland board passed resolutions at a March 21st meeting to seek its members' approval in removing Donnachadha Reynolds and Jacques Kinane as directors. Mr Reynolds and Mr Kinane allege that moves to remove them from the board are an attempt to silence them as whistleblowers.

An EGM will be held on Sunday at the Helix conference centre on the Dublin City University campus, where delegates from scouting groups will vote on two motions to remove the board members.

In a statement prepared in advance of the EGM, and circulated to scouting groups last month, Mr Reynolds and Mr Kinane allege that since joining the board of the organisation in September 2022, they have observed conduct and behaviours they believe to be "illegal, ethically unacceptable, unsafe from a governance and corporate law perspective, and an abuse of the core principles of scouting".

"We perceive that the national executive of Scouting Ireland is not working effectively or efficiently and our ability to deliver supports and services or deliver on our mission falls woefully short," they said.

They further claimed the board was "not fully transparent or accountable" to shareholders about "the state of the organisation". Shareholders who voiced complaints about the organisation's services appeared to be punished, they said.

The men said "the people at the heart" of Scouting Ireland's mission - "young people" - were the "victims of the company's failings".

"We believe that the core of the matter is that the board are attempting to silence us as whistleblowers recognised by external parties," they claimed.

Appealing to members to oppose next month's motions, the directors said it was "time to end the abhorrent practices of attacking people who disagree with the board or executives' views".

"A vote to remove us is a vote to continue these unfair practices and an endorsement of the boards [sic] performance to date."

Mr Reynolds and Mr Kinane declined to comment on the upcoming votes when contacted.

In a statement, Scouting Ireland said the board "operates in accordance with the principles of good corporate governance and the law".

"The forthcoming EGM is a matter for the members of Scouting Ireland and we will be making no further comment," a spokeswoman said.

In an email circulated to Scouting Ireland members ahead of the EGM, the board of Scouting Ireland outlined its reasoning for seeking the removal of the two men. The email was signed by directors Paul Mannion, Richard Forde, Lisa Barnes, Ned Brennan, Pat Kidney, Lorraine Lally and Eoin O'Shea.

The directors claimed that Mr Reynolds and Mr Kinane were "damaging Scouting Ireland's reputation and its relationships" by making "unsubstantiated allegations" about the organisation to its stakeholders - including the Department of Children - and in the media.

The letter claims the approval of the organisation's accounts and financial statements for 2022 was delayed when Mr Kinane and Mr Reynolds made "allegations about the conduct of the board in the audit and the contents of the 2022 accounts", but then failed to engage with auditors to advance the issues raised.

The directors further alleged that Mr Reynolds and Mr Kinane "disregarded their confidentiality and fiduciary obligations", including when they approached The Currency, the online business and financial news publisher, with information "discussed in confidence at board meetings".

Their conduct, the directors claimed, had "not met the standards of governance expected of directors" and was in breach of the organisation's code of conduct for directors. They said it was in the "best interest" of the organisation that the two be removed from the board with immediate effect.

The directors claimed Mr Reynolds and Mr Kinane were asked to resign voluntarily, but declined.

In a statement posted on his Facebook page on Tuesday, Mr Kinane said he and Mr Reynolds were formally recognised as whistleblowers under the Protected Disclosure Act - recognition that is not gained "on foot of a frivolous complaint".

He said it "requires both a burden of proof and demonstration that reasonable efforts were made to resolve the situation prior to reporting".

The move to remove the two directors is the latest development in a spiralling internal dispute at the youth organisation. In a November 7th document, Mr Reynolds and Mr Kinane claimed that the "integrity" of child protection standards in the youth organisation was in "jeopardy" due to infighting among directors.

They also claimed that concerns they raised about the handling of the membership status of a volunteer, who was later convicted of abusing children, had not been appropriately investigated.

They further stated they had concerns about signing off on the organisation's 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 document was sent to members of the Scouting Ireland board, and shared with officials at the Department of Children, the organisation's main public funder.

Scouting Ireland 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 organisation strongly denied that a safeguarding issue was not investigated properly.

In a February 2nd letter to the board, Mr Reynolds and Mr Kinane claimed they had been subjected to "retaliatory actions" for raising concerns as whistleblowers.

Mr Reynolds has been suspended from the organisation since the middle of last year following a clash with Joe Marken, Scouting Irelands interim chief executive, during a board meeting in June.

Following revelations of internal disputes, the department commissioned an independent review to examine the governance of Scouting Ireland. At present, it is tendering for an independent expert to carry out the review.

In 2018, government funding to Scouting Ireland was suspended and the organisation's entire board stepped down following reporting by The Irish Times detailing the flawed handling of a serious sexual assault allegation concerning two adult volunteers.

The organisation has also grappled with hundreds of disclosures of historical child sexual abuse at the Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland and Scout Association of Ireland, two organisations that merged to form Scouting Ireland in 2004.

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. Scouting Ireland is one of the largest youth organisations in the country, and receives €1.3 million a year from the department.