

Heather Humphreys waited a year to settle Charities Regulator conflict of interest

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Then minister was told in January 2024 that regulator had concern about dual board roles, files show Heather Humphreys referred questions on the issue to the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Former minister Heather Humphreys waited one year to settle a serious conflict of interest on the Charities Regulator board, leaving a director in place for 12 months who was also on the board of a charity it was investigating.

Internal files show the then minister for community development was told in January 2024 of the regulator's concerns about the dual board roles of a director who was also a Scouting Ireland director while the regulator was investigating the scouting body.

But Galway barrister Lorraine Lally remained on the board until January 2025, when she stepped down abruptly on the day Ms Humphreys threatened to remove her if she did not resign. The minister's intervention came 13 months after the regulator first asked Ms Lally to consider her position.

Asked about the issue, Ms Humphreys referred questions to the Department of Rural and Community Development.

"Following the concerns raised in January 2024, the minister instructed senior officials in the department to engage with the Charities Regulator in order investigate the allegations contained in the correspondence," the department said.

"It is important to note that no conclusive evidence was provided and, at that point, there was no statutory investigation into Scouting Ireland. Also at that time, the regulator confirmed that procedures were in place to deal with any conflict of interest issues that might arise on the board."

Ms Lally declined to comment. Ms Humphreys appointed her in 2022 to the Charities Regulator, which is required to be "independent in the performance of its functions".

The files were released under the Freedom of Information Act. Ms Humphreys retired from politics after the November election but is a prospective contender for Fine Gael's candidacy in the presidential election this year.

On Scouting Ireland's board since 2019, Ms Lally is the longest-serving director and chairs the safeguarding subcommittee.

The body is one of Ireland's largest youth organisations. It has been wracked by governance and safeguarding controversies in recent years, culminating in a big historical child sexual abuse scandal.

Ms Humphreys did not move against Ms Lally until her final day in office, the week after the regulator escalated inquiries by sending statutory inspectors into Scouting Ireland. Her

threat to remove Ms Lally was made on the day The Irish Times reported the conflict of interest.

The files show the regulator raised concerns one year before Ms Humphreys finally moved. In a letter about "a board member and Scouting Ireland" on January 15th, 2025, regulator chairman Gerry Kearney cited correspondence a year earlier.

"I refer to the above matter and previous correspondence exchanged between the members of the board of the Charities Regulator ('the Regulator') and you and your officials in January and February 2024."

The department refused access to five items of correspondence in January and February 2024.

However, the chairman's letter said board members of the regulator "approached Ms Lally and asked that she consider her position" in December 2023. "She declined to do so." Mr Kearney and another board member met Ms Lally in May 2024: "Again, she strongly rejected any suggestion of stepping down."

The department said: "Any decision by a minister to remove a member from any board must take account of due process and fair procedure. Any such decision must be grounded in substantiated facts and have a sound legal basis."

It added that the Charities Regulator's ongoing engagement with Scouting Ireland during 2024 resulted in the regulator appointing inspectors on January 15th, 2025 to commence a statutory investigation of the charity. The board chair then wrote to the minister in light of that investigation and "a process commenced which culminated in the resignation of Ms Lally on 21 January 2025", the department said.