



Conor Ryan
Investigative Correspondent
Irish Examiner
Lapps Quay
Cork City
conorryan@examiner.ie

John McGuinness TD
Chairman
Public Accounts Committee
Houses of the Oireachtas
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Cc Ted McEnergy, Clerk of the Public Accounts Committee and the members of the committee

Mr McGuinness,

Conor Ryan is my name. I am a journalist with the Irish Examiner newspaper. I am writing to request that the committee give consideration to a simple measure which I believe would greatly improve the financial transparency of the public bodies.

I am suggesting that all financial accounts and statements referred to the committee should be published on its website. Currently these accounts are laid before the Oireachtas and scanned by its in-house library and research service. However, the electronic copies are only available on the Oireachtas intranet. The restriction means that members of the public, or journalists who are not part of the press gallery, cannot access them.

If you adopted this suggestion there would be no additional scanning costs to be incurred by the committee. They are already uploaded and hosted on the Oireachtas Library site. So, if you're your committee linked to them, it would not be necessary to consume additional memory.

At present there is also no single online portal where the public can visit to assess the accounts of bodies funded by the taxpayer. Having the opportunity to view these accounts would allow people, especially those with a particular knowledge of State organisations, to scan accounts and monitor spending. It would provide an extra pair of eyes in terms of financial scrutiny.

An assessment of the committee's own correspondence file will show that there are currently a large volume of financial statements, accounts and auditors' reports which are prepared by public bodies and laid before the Oireachtas. But unless they are also presenting accounts to the Companies Registration Office those records effectively disappear.

Consider this example, VECs present their accounts as V15 financial statements each year. They are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General. They are laid before the Oireachtas. But they are not readily available to the public unless a particular VEC volunteers to circulate them. The V15 statements cannot be accessed through any other service. VECs are not covered under the Freedom of Information Act. However, there is more than €1bn in annual spending accounted for by these committees.

Aside from VECs there are third level institutions and local bodies who enjoy an unusual level of privacy that is not afforded to private companies who must file accounts with the CRO.

These reports and statements are, as a matter of course, available to the Public Accounts Committee. However, due to the busy work programme of the Committee, the accounts are not discussed beyond brief mentions during the weekly *Business of the Committee* agenda item. It means the public is not even aware of these valuable documents.

Furthermore, the statements are not available under the Freedom of Information Act, because documents presented elsewhere are precluded from release. In the case of semi-state bodies registered as limited companies, it costs citizens a request fee for each submission purchased from the CRO.

I believe people should not have to rely on the CRO service when it comes to bodies reliant on their taxes. Reviewing the financial performance of some semi-states can be particularly costly as they are made up of complex corporate structures, with a number of subsidiary companies. The Irish Greyhound Board and Horse Racing Ireland are two examples for the committee to consider on this point.

I believe it would add greatly to the transparency of all public bodies if citizens, connected parties and members of the press could have ready online access to these supposedly public documents. Given the pressures currently experienced by the Comptroller and Auditor General's office and the workload of the Public Accounts Committee the casual surveillance possible when accounts are freely available to the public could be a valuable safety net.

I hope the committee can consider this request and establish a section available on its website for these documents to be viewed. I am happy to discuss this further if my suggestion is not clear or to provide additional examples if it helps. I can be contacted at 021-4802360.

Kind regards,



Conor Ryan