

**Statement by Minister Katherine Zappone's to the Joint Oireachtas
Committee for Children and Youth Affairs**

Wednesday 21 November 2018

Thank you, Chair, for inviting me to attend this session of the Joint Oireachtas Committee for Children and Youth Affairs to address the subject of Scouting Ireland and its funding.

Deputies and Senators will be aware that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs administers a range of funding schemes and programmes to support the provision of youth services to young people throughout the country including those from disadvantaged communities.

Youth clubs and services have a significant contribution to make to realise the goals of the National Youth Strategy as part of a cross-sectoral, whole of society approach to supporting young people in their everyday lives. Scouting Ireland is one such service which provides a non-formal educational experience that is firmly rooted in the experiential educational mode and is one of Ireland's largest youth movements, with over 50,000 members.

Scouting Ireland is funded by my Department through the Youth Service Grant Scheme and the allocation for 2018 was €876,336. Scouting Ireland groups around the country also are eligible to apply for grants under the aforementioned Local Youth Club Grant Scheme.

In March/April 2018, I became aware that there were deficits in the governance arrangements in Scouting Ireland. I had concerns in relation to how a serious alleged incident was handled in addition to other matters i.e. safeguarding and garda vetting. All publicly funded organisations are required to meet strong governance standards and as Minister for Children and Youth Affairs I have a duty of care regarding the public funding provided by my Department. In light of my concerns I decided to withhold any further drawdown of funding to Scouting Ireland until such time as I could be satisfied that the organisation's governance standards are up to the required level.

When I became aware of the extent of the concerns, some of which had been aired in the media, I wrote to Scouting Ireland on Friday 13th April advising them of my intention to withhold further funding to the organisation. I also requested an urgent meeting with the Board of Scouting Ireland. The purpose of the meeting was to provide Scouting Ireland with an opportunity to clarify the revelations highlighted in the media coverage which raised serious questions for the organisation. I subsequently met with Scouting Ireland on 19 April. They confirmed their commitment to implement the recommendations in relation to safeguarding and garda vetting and to carry out a full review of historic cases. They also informed me of their proposals to put new structures in place.

They had already engaged Mr Ian Elliott to conduct a review of its child safeguarding/ protection policies and procedures. An interim report was produced in October 2017 and a final report was produced in January 2018. Both of these reports were subsequently submitted to my Department in March 2018.

In 2017 Scouting Ireland commissioned Mr Ian Elliott to carry out a case review into the organisation's handling of an allegation of a serious sexual assault on an adult volunteer by another adult volunteer.

While this alleged assault took place in 2009, it was only reported within the organisation in 2016. Following on from Mr Elliott's report of his review, Scouting Ireland engaged an independent barrister to conduct a full investigation into this allegation. In particular the investigation would examine the handling of the matter by four senior volunteers, three of whom were on the Board of Scouting Ireland at the time of Mr Elliott's report. I expect to receive both reports once the independent barrister's investigation is completed.

In May I appointed Ms Jillian van Turnhout, as an independent expert, to examine the governance and related issues within Scouting Ireland. Ms van Turnhout submitted her final report to me on 14th June.

It contained a number of recommendations in the areas of safeguarding, management of the organisation, governance proposals and charities regulation. The report suggested that the restoration of funding to Scouting Ireland should be clearly linked to the successful implementation of these recommendations.

The Board of Scouting Ireland subsequently confirmed its decision to fully implement all the recommendations contained in the Review of the Scouting Ireland report. On this basis I decided on 25th June to provide Scouting Ireland with interim funding for a further three month period, up until the end of September of this year.

In providing this interim funding I requested that Scouting Ireland provide me with a further report by 24th September detailing progress in the implementation of the outstanding recommendations contained in the Van Turnhout Review of Scouting Ireland. This report was subsequently submitted to me on 24th September for consideration.

At the end of September the then Board of Scouting Ireland voted to reinstate the Chief Scout as Chair of their forthcoming EGM. This was done notwithstanding the fact that the Chief Scout is a respondent in the ongoing independent barrister's investigation. I felt that this was unacceptable. Shortly afterwards I received letters from the then Interim Chair & Mr Ian Elliott setting out their serious concerns about the Board's actions and its ability to properly govern the organisation. Having discussed the matter with both, I decided to further suspend funding for as long as the then Board was in place.

Scouting Ireland held an EGM on October 6th 2018 at which all the new governance proposals were passed by over 95% of those in attendance. A new Board of 10 was elected following a skills assessment process. They took up their new role as of midnight on the 6th October with the former Board resigning from that time.

I have met with Ms Annette Byrne, who was Acting Chairperson during this change process and also with the CEO and I was pleased to learn of the organisation's commitment to change and good governance. A new interim Chairperson, Ms Aisling Kelly, has now been appointed along with new Board members at the EGM.

I look forward to having a constructive working relationship with the new team and the realisation of Scouting Ireland's ambitions for the young people they work with.

To date, I am satisfied with the significant progress made by Scouting Ireland in terms of the implementation of the Jillian van Turnhout recommendations and in the essential governance changes committed to by the organisation.

For this reason I have restored funding to Scouting Ireland until the end of April 2019. I have requested a further progress report from the organisation by the end of March 2019 as well as copies of the independent barrister's report and the final Ian Elliott report of the individual case review he conducted. I will review the funding arrangement again at that stage.