

Opening Statement by Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Tourism and Sport
Brendan Griffin, TD

Mr Chairman

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today, though it gives me no joy that we are once again discussing the difficult situation of soccer in Ireland. With positive recent performances from our men's and women's national teams and the exciting prospect of hosting EURO 2020 matches at the Aviva Stadium next year, this should be a time for optimism. But the FAI has not been able to move on from the crisis which began last March. I am sorry to say that we are now seeing the real impact of failures in financial management and corporate governance at the top tier of the football pyramid on those at the bottom, the grassroots clubs, coaches, volunteers, players and supporters.

One of the most common criticisms we heard of the FAI was that decisions were made by a small group at the top and the wider membership never got the opportunity to have their say. Last May, Minister Ross and I hosted a very successful Irish Football Stakeholders Forum in the Mansion House, which I believe several Committee Members attended. That forum brought together stakeholders from across the Irish football community to discuss the future direction of football in Ireland.

There were some frankly hysterical warnings that this would be a bad-tempered event which would not deliver anything meaningful. In fact, the engagement by those who attended was respectful, considered, and serious about the wellbeing of the sport. There was an openness to new ideas and a willingness to listen to the views of other sectors of the game. The broader football community made it clear that they are committed to growing their sport, and that they want to move past the current crisis.

We in Government are committed to growing football in Ireland as well. We know the positive role it plays in Irish life, in clubs throughout the country and, in spite of the challenges, we have been doing all we can to support the game of soccer in Ireland.

In relation to Government assistance for capital projects, we can be very proud of the huge improvements in sports facilities in recent years. More than 10,000 projects have benefitted from sports capital funding since 1998 bringing total allocations in that time to over €1 billion. Soccer clubs have benefitted significantly in this regard. In fact over €156m has been granted to soccer clubs, leagues and organisations. The final grants under the 2018 round of the Sports Capital Programme were announced last month and under this round alone, over 300 grants valued at €6.5m were allocated to soccer clubs throughout the country.

The Department is now undertaking a full review of all aspects of the 2018 SCP. This Review will include consideration of the timing and scale of the next round of the Programme. In this regard I expect that the Programme will again be open for applications in the coming months and I look forward to seeing many more excellent soccer projects from clubs in every county applying and being assisted.

This Committee had a very interesting discussion last week with Hockey Ireland which underscored the importance of State support for our amateur athletes representing Ireland in international competition. In this regard, Minister Ross and I are absolutely committed to support the players in the Women's National Team who make such a huge contribution as the leading exponents of Women's football in Ireland. I am delighted that we have been able to develop an effective intermediary arrangement for the payment of grant funding for the Women's National Team. The team achieved record attendance for home internationals this year and delivered some impressive performances to boot. I am confident that, under the guidance of Team Manager Vera Pauw the team can achieve their ambition of qualifying for their first major tournament, the Womens' EURO 2021.

As Minister Ross has said, Sport Ireland has developed a similar arrangement in relation to the provision of funding for development officers. I welcome this pragmatic solution and I am confident that with Sport Ireland support, the development officers will be able to continue their important work with grassroots soccer.

Sport Ireland are continuing to explore every option to continue our support for soccer in Ireland. With the best will in the world, it may not be possible to find a mechanism for every programme. This is why it is so important that those at the top of the FAI commit to restoring public trust. The Board must show leadership and act decisively to implement serious reform in the association's corporate governance. At the meeting earlier this week, the Board members acknowledged to Minister Ross and myself the serious failures that occurred under the previous regime. The indicated that they accept the urgent need for reform. I trust that they will now redouble their efforts to make good on their commitment to overhaul their association

Unfortunately, when governance failures occur within individual organisations, they can tend to damage the reputation of the entire sports system. I believe it would be unfair to tar all of those involved in Irish sport with the same brush. I meet frequently with the Chairs, Directors and Chief Executives of the various National Governing Bodies, as do the Committee Members, and I have great confidence in their commitment to strive always for the benefit of their members and to the values of sport, such as honesty, integrity and fair play.

But I understand that a crisis such as this lays bare structural weaknesses, which if not addressed can lead to difficulties in the future. The development of stronger governance is therefore very important, at both an organisation and system level.

The need for measures aimed at better governance in National Governing Bodies was recognised a number of years ago and in 2017, Sport Ireland introduced the mandatory adoption by NGBs of the Governance Code for Sport (formerly the Governance Code for the Community, Voluntary

and Charity Sector). The Governance Code for Sport is a principles-based code consisting of best practice for Boards.

The Government's National Sports Policy 2018-2027, which Minister Ross and I published in 2018, requires that all NGBs and Local Sports Partnerships are signed up to the Governance Code by the end of 2021. I am pleased to say that there has been good progress with 31 NGBs and sporting bodies already fully signed up to the Code with a further 50 bodies working towards adoption of the code. The FAI is one of those NGBs which has committed to achieving compliance with the Governance Code and I would urge the Board and the new CEO, when that person is appointed, to ensure that they continue that important work.

As the Committee knows, Sport Ireland already has robust auditing arrangements in place in relation to the funding it allocates to the main field sport NGBs – the FAI, the GAA and the IRFU. Following discussions at this Committee earlier this year, Sport Ireland has now strengthened the terms and conditions of its funding schemes, which will apply to grants from 2020. The changes confer full audit rights on Sport Ireland and require NGBs to disclose remuneration packages of their CEOs to Sport Ireland. I want to acknowledge the good work that Sport Ireland has done in revising the terms of conditions of funding.

The most immediate tasks for the FAI are to appoint the independent Chair, the other independent Directors and to appoint an independent, full-time chief executive. These appointments are absolutely vital for the association to rebuild public trust and to enable the Government to once again provide funding for the FAI's programmes and capital projects. The FAI Board members confirmed to Minister Ross and I that they are absolutely committed to these appointments and I hope that we will see progress in the near future.

I welcome the announcement by Donal Conway that he will step down at an EGM in January and the recent resignation of John Earley from the Board. I regret that they did not step down at the

EGM last summer. But I welcome the fact that they are now stepping down to make way for new leadership in the FAI.

As you will know, the FAI at its AGM in June agreed overwhelmingly to accept the recommendations of the Governance Review Group and to completely overhaul the association's rule book and structures. This was a positive step and I know that progress has been made since then. This progress must be maintained if the FAI is to restore public trust.

I want to reiterate that no public funding will be provided to the FAI by my Department or Sport Ireland until we see evidence of real reform and a clean break with the previous regime at Board and Executive levels. The FAI is well aware of the steps they need to take to bring about a situation where public funding can be reinstated. And I would urge them to do so without any further delays.

Thank you.

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