

RTÉ Opening Statement
Kevin Bakhurst, Director General, RTÉ
Public Accounts Committee
12 October 2023

Chair, Deputies, Senators – thank you for the invitation to be with you today. It has been a number of weeks since we met, and a lot has happened in that time. I hope the significant number of documents that we have provided to you have been helpful.

Recent events have marked a turning point in RTÉ with regard to our standards of governance. We have seen how easily trust can be shaken, and we understand the urgency of the job to restore that trust. Since I took office in mid-July, both I and the new leadership team, working with staff across the organisation, have been working to do all that we can to expedite the urgent reforms required to restore confidence in RTÉ.

I'm pleased to share with you some of the reforms that are already in hand.

We are working at pace to deliver RTÉ's strategic framework plan to Government by the end of the month. That outline plan will form the basis for consultation with the public, with public representatives, and with staff. It will set out the stall for a better RTÉ: better for audiences, and better for Ireland.

As we move toward delivery of that outline strategy, you should know that the focus on immediate and long-lasting reform remains sharp. As you know, I have appointed a new interim leadership team. Key decisions now come to that full leadership team, not least decisions regarding top presenter contracts.

We are now operating with full transparency to the Board, and we are in the late stages of consultation on the new Register of Interests and Register of External Activities, both of which will be key to maintaining perceptions of integrity and impartiality. We have completed one staff survey, and have just launched another seeking views and suggestions as to how we could improve our overall governance standards.

We are managing our finances carefully and working to cut costs in the face of declining revenue from the TV Licence. Recent initiatives such as the freeze on recruitment of staff and stopping discretionary spending, alongside deferring some investment in digital and capital projects has saved several million Euro. And RTÉ'S commercial performance has been good. While cash reserves are solid for the short-term, clearly long-lasting reform of the broken funding system is urgently needed.

RTÉ is committed to the many reviews in place. As has been supplied to the Committee, the two Grant Thornton reports regarding the misstatement of earnings to Ryan Tubridy are now concluded. A further two investigations into Toy Show the Musical, and the Voluntary Exit Schemes conducted by RTÉ in 2019 and 2021, are nearing completion and it is hoped to conclude those reports by the end of this month. It is also hoped that the Mazars enquiry as to the usage of the Barter Account within RTÉ (and any other related matter) will be finished by early November. Finally, the work of the other two Government appointed Expert Advisory committees (Governance and Culture, and HR and Contractors) have commenced and I have instructed all divisions that their work is to be given full and swift co-operation.

You will also have noted that Richard Collins has resigned as Chief Financial Officer. Due to various legal restrictions, I am not in a position to comment further on that matter, but I can assure you that I will be moving to advertise for the role of CFO as soon as possible. This will be a priority appointment for the permanent leadership team, alongside the appointment of a new Commercial Director.

We are grateful that it has been confirmed that RTÉ will be receiving €16m from Budget 2024. This follows on from the recommendation made by the Future of Media Commission that interim funding would be required pending a proper reform of the licence fee, and we would extend thanks to the various members of the Houses of the Oireachtas who have publicly supported the importance of public service media being properly supported. It is critical that the funding of public service media in Ireland is put on a more stable footing. This not only affects RTÉ, but also the independent sector, to which RTÉ plays a very important role in sustaining and showcasing.

I would like to commend staff across RTÉ for continuing to deliver high quality programmes and content to very large audiences. News coverage, investigative journalism, live sport such as the rugby world cup, record numbers using the RTÉ Player and the highly successful new season of the *Late Late Show* with Patrick Kielty.

I am determined that RTÉ will be transformed so that the public, Government and our partners can have full confidence in RTÉ, and its management. We understand that in order to achieve that we need to share a compelling and credible plan as to how the organisation must change. As I said, I can confirm that RTÉ hopes to provide an outline framework for strategic reform around the end of this month, with a commitment to delivering a more detailed and costed Statement of Strategy by early next year. A strategic change of this scale requires considerable levels of financial modelling and deliberation; among the elements being explored is the sale of more of the campus – an issue that I know several of you have expressed an interest in. We are awaiting more up-to-date valuations, but early indications are that a complete sale of the Donnybrook campus is unlikely, and the repurposing of the current site will not be without challenges and significant costs.

We must rebuild an RTÉ that is trusted and enjoyed, one that's relevant and loved, and one that brings the country together for important national moments and events. Public service content, value for money, and trust, will be at the heart of a transformed RTÉ, and I and my team are committed to the work required to deliver that.