

Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Opening Statement by Secretary General, Joe Hackett

8 February 2022

Good afternoon Chairman and members of the Committee, and thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today.

On 13 January, I commenced a review of, and adherence to, public health advice, workplace protocols and arrangements in place in Iveagh House on 17 June 2020. I undertook to provide a report on the matter to the Minister by the end of January. As Accounting Officer with responsibility for the proper administration of the Department, I appointed two senior officials from the Human Resources Division to a Review Team to conduct meetings with staff, to gather clear accounts on what happened that day and to examine all relevant Departmental records. I delivered the report to the Minister on 31 January who directed that it be published that day.

At the outset, I want to acknowledge the concern expressed by members of this Committee and the wider public about the incident that occurred in the workplace shortly after Ireland was elected to a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. As Secretary General, I would like to say sorry to this Committee, and to the public, and to acknowledge the offence caused. In doing so, I am particularly mindful of the enormous sacrifices made by our fellow citizens over the past two years.

The image of staff within the Department celebrating has caused confusion and anger among our population that consistently abided by extensive public health

rules over such a prolonged period. In the Review, I acknowledge the hurt caused and reputational damage done. I want to assure this Committee that the Department deeply regrets the incident.

The Review outlines:

- (i) the workplace arrangements, public health advice and statutory rules in place on the day of 17 June 2020;
- (ii) the circumstances under which staff were present in Iveagh House;
- (iii) the nature of the work that required on-site presence;
- (iv) the circumstances whereby staff gathered in the UN Unit of Iveagh House following the result of the vote; and relevant timelines.

The relevant statutory regulations in place at the time were examined, as were public health and internal guidance.

Members will be aware of the detailed description contained in the Review of events leading up to the result of the vote, including the efforts made to ensure that staff complied with public health guidance throughout the day.

Staff watched the announcement in a large open plan office space in Iveagh House. The result came through at 9.10pm and staff came together briefly to celebrate the outcome. The incident was captured in the photograph taken by the then Secretary General. Thereafter, the group dispersed. Some returned to their desks to continue work, some watched a press conference from Government Buildings, some stood in small groups discussing the outcome and others prepared to leave.

The Minister has provided the Committee with a detailed account of his attendance in Iveagh House on that date. The Review team received no evidence that public health guidance was breached during his presence in the UN Policy Unit to thank staff for their work.

Based on meetings with staff, and an examination of substantial amounts of documentary evidence annexed, six conclusions were reached:

First, staff working in Iveagh House on 17 June 2020, many of whom had come to the office prepared to work through that night, were conducting essential business on behalf of the Department relating to Ireland's campaign to secure a seat on the UN Security Council.

Second, no event was planned to celebrate the success of Ireland's election. Rather, planning was focused on the work that would have been required that evening, overnight and the next day if Ireland had not been successful in a first round of voting.

Third, extensive measures were taken to facilitate compliance with COVID guidance in advance of 17 June.

Fourth, in the hours leading up to the announcement of the vote result, public health guidance was observed.

Fifth, there was a serious breach of social distancing guidance in the period immediately following the outcome of the vote, lasting approximately one minute, when staff came together, many with glasses of alcohol in their hands, for a photograph.

Sixth, in the period following the photograph, those present dispersed into a range of activities, during which some minor breaches of guidance may have occurred.

I concluded that the then Secretary General was largely responsible for facilitating the social distancing breach and I requested him to make a donation to charity in the amount of €2,000. I also asked the three other Management Board level officers present in the photograph to make a similar donation in the amount of €1,000. They did not actively facilitate the breach of guidance, but could, as senior managers, have tried to prevent its occurrence. Each of the officials concerned agreed make the donation as requested.

In preparing this review, I was conscious of the need for care in making judgements on the behaviour of others with the hindsight of 19 months. Sometimes in public controversies, assumptions can be made without due regard to the full facts. I am satisfied that the Review provides an accurate account of what happened on 17 June.

Mr Chairman, my predecessor as Secretary General has been the subject of considerable public attention over the past month. I can assure this Committee that he sincerely regrets his actions. The incident, as captured in the photograph, should not detract from the sustained service he has provided to the country and the positive contribution he made as Secretary General. Under his direction, the Department became more open, inclusive and responsive to the needs of our citizens. Through a wide range of assignments, notably on Northern Ireland, he made an important contribution to peace and wellbeing on this island.

I do not believe that the incident covered by the Review devalues the achievement of our election to the Security Council. It remains a remarkable accomplishment by a small group of dedicated public servants.

I can understand how the photograph from that night could suggest that the Department was tone deaf to the difficulties facing a public doing their level best to comply with official guidance. However, I want to assure the Committee that the image certainly does not reflect the values and commitment of those pictured or of the wider Department.

The staff of the Department of Foreign Affairs are fully committed to delivering the best possible service to this country and its people. We have a strong track record of doing so. Our people are today serving in more dangerous and challenging locations than ever before. Whether we serve at home or abroad, our teams will continue to advance Irish interests and values, to deal with the impact of Brexit and uncertainty in Northern Ireland, to provide the best possible passport and consular service and to manage one of the most effective development assistance programmes in the world.

I thank you for your attention. [ENDS]