

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM ACHAINÍOCHA ÓN BPOBAL

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC PETITIONS

Dé Céadaoin, 4 Nollaig 2019

Wednesday, 4 December 2019

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies

Seanadóirí / Senators

Pat Buckley,	Jerry Buttimer,
Shane Cassells,	Pippa Hackett.
Martin Heydon.	

Teachta / Deputy Sean Sherlock sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session until 1.40 p.m.

Decisions on Public Petitions Received

Chairman: We will now move to the consideration of public petitions. Petition 00047/19 seeks to triple the number of Irish resident election observers placed on foreign election observation missions in the next 12 months. The petition states that Ireland is lagging behind in sending Irish observers abroad. Do any members wish to contribute?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I support the overall thrust of the petition in the context of increasing the number of qualified election observation postings. As somebody engaged in election observation, I can say this is an important element of the work that the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly does but, equally, we have a role through the EU and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR in terms of how we can enhance the electoral democratic process in many countries. Election observation is a very important and critical part of that. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade - I think it was in 2018 - did close the applications for election observation, but it is important that the range of observation positions is increased. The petitioner in his reasons for his recommendations makes a good point that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has stated no recommendations have been made by Dóchas or the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade. It is important to recognise that we do and can have a role to play as Members of the Oireachtas but also to assist in the enhancement of election observation. The point that has been made by the petitioner around us lagging behind is an interesting one. I am not sure that is actually the case, but he does provide us with a reference graph. It is important that we have a discussion on the matter and that we do seek to bring about an increased number of election observation positions. Go raibh maith agat.

Chairman: I thank Senator Buttimer. I call Deputy Buckley.

Deputy Pat Buckley: It is in the conclusion here, in the very last line, that this could be reviewed again in 2022-23. It is actually opened up for review anyway, so I would agree with the recommendation at the present time.

Chairman: The proposal is that we forward a copy of the response from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to the petitioner and close the petition. Is that agreed? Agreed.

On Petition 00048/19, it is proposed that we forward a copy of the response from the Department of Justice and Equality to the petitioner with a copy of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill 2017, advising the petitioner that the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality has held hearings and is currently preparing a report on online harassment and harmful communications and close the petition. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The final petition is 00049/19. I think Deputy Buckley has a view on this.

Deputy Pat Buckley: Yes, Chairman, and thank you. It is just on the recommendation that we forward a copy of the response from the Department of Education and Skills to the petitioner and close the petition. The summary of what the petitioner is actually looking for references reforms in the primary school structure, which is very positive. Society is changing in terms of issues such as mental health and obesity, pressures with social media and so on, and the conclusion of this petition tells us a draft curriculum framework was due to be published in

December this year. It would probably benefit us, but it would certainly benefit the petitioner and hopefully the primary schools in the future, to not only forward a copy of the response from the Department of Education and Skills but keep the petition open so that at least the petitioner will have an opportunity to read that report, and if anything comes back, it will be a fair process.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Buckley. We have a proposal to keep the petition open subject to further correspondence. Deputy Cassells would like to respond.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I support that proposal by Deputy Buckley. On what the petitioner is seeking in terms of the school curriculum at primary level and wanting to respond to the needs of children in society, from mental health issues to obesity, social media and so forth, I want to recognise what is already being done in schools. I have attended meetings in the past couple of weeks with the HSE on the healthy eating programme. I know from my own three children who are all in primary school that this programme which is in operation bans, certainly in the school that my children are in, snacks other than healthy eating snacks. In terms of going from the academic, desk-based approach to the more outdoor-centred approach, and the response from the Department referencing Aistear, I want to recognise as well the work that Aistear is doing because I have seen its implementation and it is a very good programme.

The evolution of the curriculum over the last decade has been substantial and has been significant in terms of producing a broader and more holistic educational experience for children. Certainly, I see that at first hand simply because I have three young children in primary school. In respect of the broader debate on the curriculum, I welcome that this report will be published this month, so I support Deputy Buckley in saying we should wait until we examine that further. We have had the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in here before for extensive debate in respect of something similar in terms of the requirement and necessity for homework at primary school level; that was a hugely interesting debate about the rationale the Department set down for children having written studies after school and so forth. There is a broader piece of work here, and I think we are right maybe to keep this open and have a further examination of it. I want to acknowledge that a huge amount of work has been done on issues like obesity through the Department and the HSE on the healthy eating programme, the change from desktop to more outdoor through the work of the Aistear programme in which my own wife is involved. Young teachers are hugely cognisant of the feelings and emotions and well-being of young children in schools, and it is only right and proper that that be acknowledged.

Chairman: Would any other members like to contribute? No. There is a proposal that we keep the petition open pending the publication of the expected report. Is that agreed? Agreed. We will still forward a copy of the response to the petitioner, but we will not close the petition. Deputy Buckley would like to respond.

Deputy Pat Buckley: There were two things I was looking at in the notes. It is stated that in discussion with the Inland Fisheries reference was made to avoiding duplication so obviously there is a repetition of answers coming in. Is that still ongoing? Will that petition be coming back to the committee? It will; that is all right because it seemed to have gotten lost.

Chairman: To clarify, that petition remains open. We have received, as members will know, correspondence from the petitioners in response to the submissions made by the various State agencies. That petition is by no means closed.

Deputy Pat Buckley: Good. Thank you, Chairman. There was another one two meetings back, Petition 00057/19: Unauthorised Development of the River Shannon. There was a lot of

documentation coming in. I am new to the committee and I was interested in this and other petitions. I am just trying to clarify if they all still remain open. Would it be weeks or months before some of these petitions come to fruition? The Chairman indicates it is, that is fine.

Chairman: My understanding is that we are still awaiting correspondence, but there may come a time where we need to correspond with the agencies that have been corresponded with by the secretariat in respect of when we will receive a reply. It is fair to say that petitions have to be dealt with in a timely fashion as well and particularly where we are corresponding with State agencies or State-funded agencies and particularly North-South bodies. I would hold the view that there is a reasonable amount of time that one would give to allow people to respond, but one's patience wears thin as well if one perceives that the process here is being delayed in any way. That petition very much remains open.

Deputy Pat Buckley: That is perfect. That is all the clarification I was looking for.

Chairman: Thank you. I propose that the committee adjourn until 1.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 29 January 2020. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.51 p.m. until 1.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 29 January 2020.