

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM SHLÁINTE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

Déardaoin, 21 Samhain 2019

Thursday, 21 November 2019

The Joint Committee met at 2.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Bernard J. Durkan,	John Dolan,
Martin Kenny,*	Maura Hopkins,*
Eugene Murphy,*	Rónán Mullen.
Kate O'Connell.	

* In éagmais/In the absence of Deputies Margaret Murphy O'Mahony and Louise O'Reilly, and Senator Colm Burke.

I láthair/ In attendance: Deputies Michael Fitzmaurice, Denis Naughten and Bríd Smith and Senator Terry Leyden.

Teachta/Deputy Michael Harty sa Chathaoir/in the Chair

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: We have a quorum and will commence proceedings. I propose that we suspend again briefly to allow the witnesses to take their seats. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Sitting suspended at 2.36 p.m. and resumed at 2.41 p.m.

Proposed Closure of Cuisle Accessible Holiday and Respite Care Resort: Discussion

Chairman: We are meeting to discuss the proposed closure of the Cuisle Accessible Holiday and Respite Care Resort in County Roscommon, which is run by the Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA. On behalf of the committee, I welcome Ms Rosemary Keogh, CEO, and Mr. Tony Cunningham, director of services.

I draw the attention of our guests to the fact that, by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I advise witnesses that any opening statements they make to the committee may be published on the committee's website after this meeting. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I invite Ms Keogh to make her opening statement.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: On behalf of the IWA, I thank the committee for the invitation to present and the opportunity to answer questions regarding the background to the decision to close the Cuisle facility in Roscommon and the consequent transition to a new hotel-based model of holiday respite services for people with physical disabilities. I am joined by the IWA's national director for services, Tony Cunningham.

The IWA has a vision of an Ireland where people with disabilities enjoy equal rights, choices and opportunities in how they live their lives and where the country itself is a model world-wide for a truly inclusive society. The IWA is a leading representative organisation and service provider for people with physical disabilities, with 20,000 members, over 2,500 employees, 57 local community centres and 2,000 volunteers. For almost 60 years, the IWA has pioneered the development and delivery of innovative, quality assured services to people with physical disabilities and has continually advocated for greater access to society on behalf of our membership. The IWA is a major provider of services to the HSE under the mandate of the service arrangements process. In 2018, the association received €41.7 million from the HSE towards delivering over 2 million hours of services nationally, including assisted-living services, resource and outreach centres, respite care and supported living. The funding received from the HSE for these services does not fully cover the associated costs of delivering those services and in 2018, the IWA contributed €1.87 million from its own unrestricted operating income in order

to maintain those services.

In June, this committee was briefed by a number of disability service provider umbrella groups on the growing funding crisis in the disability sector. In this context, during the period 2008 to 2018, the IWA has seen its financial reserves diminish by €5.7 million as it used its own funds to ensure continuity of service provision across all our services. The association's cash balances at the end of 2018 represented just four weeks' operating costs. The IWA is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee governed by a voluntary board. The majority of board members are elected from our membership at the annual general meeting and at least a third of all members must be, and are, persons with physical disability.

For 22 years, Cuisle has been a core part of the IWA as well as the community in Donamon, providing employment and social opportunities for people in the locality, as well as providing accessible holiday and respite for people with physical disabilities, particularly at a time when Cuisle first opened and when there were few or no alternatives for people with physical disabilities. The board and management of the IWA understand and share the sadness of those who visit and work in Cuisle at the news that the facility will not reopen in 2020. The difficult decision to close the Cuisle building has not come easily and was made by the board of the IWA on 18 October last following over two years of trying to find an alternative solution.

The building, which is not owned by the IWA and the lease on which expires in 2026, is in need of significant repair works, including full electrical installation and fire safety upgrades. These will cost in the region of €1.15 million at a minimum. We are aware that there is asbestos in the building and there is a high risk that if this is disturbed during construction the cost of necessary remedial works could escalate significantly. The IWA does not have the funds to pay for these essential upgrades, which are vital to keeping the leased building open for respite. During the period 2017 to 2019, there were a number of IWA board visits to Cuisle and a full meeting of the board took place in Cuisle during 2017. Also during this period, Cuisle was discussed at 14 of 21 the association's board meetings. In March 2018, the IWA commenced implementation of a new social enterprise business model for Cuisle and invested from its own funds to generate new income for Cuisle as demonstration of its commitment to continuing to provide services there, subject to the funds to pay for the essential upgrade works becoming available. For over two years, the IWA has engaged extensively with public representatives and funders but unfortunately there is no funding available to complete the essential capital works and no viable alternative has been proposed to the association by any third party.

The board has a legal obligation to everyone who stays in Cuisle and had no choice but to make the decision to close the building at the end of November. Cuisle usually closes from December to February annually due to limited bookings during this period. The IWA acknowledges the loss of employment associated with the closure of Cuisle and the impact on the local community. We are grateful to the staff for their commitment and dedication to the Cuisle-based service and the local community for their support over many years.

Over the past number of weeks, the IWA has been in discussion with Cuisle staff and their representatives. All staff have received an "expressions of interests" letter and form, the purpose of which is to capture their preferences with regard to redundancy or redeployment. At time of writing, 19 November, 25 of 42 staff had returned this form, with 24 choosing redundancy and one opting for redeployment. The IWA has written to all impacted staff with an estimate of their redundancy entitlement in accordance with the terms of the redundancy package agreed on their behalf with SIPTU. The IWA will write again to Cuisle staff with a final calculation of their redundancy entitlements when any corrections or amendments have been made following

the circulation of the redundancy estimates letters. A small number of staff will remain in employment at Cuisle for two to four weeks after 29 November to assist with the closure. Future use of the Cuisle facility will be a matter for the owners of the building. The IWA assumes that any future use will be contingent on completion of the required capital works.

In response to the difficult decision to close the Cuisle facility, and to ensure continued provision of holiday respite breaks, the IWA will commence its new holiday service in the west to provide a wide range of choices to people with disabilities seeking to take a supported respite holiday in the region by partnering with fully accessible hotels. This new and innovative service will commence in March 2020 in collaboration with the HSE. Cuisle ordinarily closes between December and February, which means that there will be a limited impact on guests during that period. Our new holiday service will provide people with a modern, inclusive hotel break in a range of locations with easy access to local towns and a wider choice of amenities. It will also enable people with disabilities to take an enjoyable holiday with friends or family in the same hotel as chosen by them from a selection of options.

The IWA has been operating comparable hotel breaks in Kilkenny since 2018 and has received positive feedback from our guests. This service was shortlisted for an Irish healthcare centre award in 2019. Some of the feedback that we have received includes “staff excellent”, “food excellent”, “feel equal going on holidays with everyone else”, “I no longer feel like people with disabilities are in a box”, “it is all excellent” and “you gave us a great holiday, not just respite”.

The IWA has developed a range of holiday respite options for all of our guests regardless of their level of support requirement - low, medium or high. The IWA will provide support to guests on a tailored individual basis. We will ensure that guests have everything they need, including fully accessible en suite bedrooms, specialised beds, aids and appliances, hoists, support with medication management and clinical tasks, and the IWA’s 24-7, staffed and skilled personal assistance service. The IWA’s fully accessible transport can be arranged during holiday breaks and will be available to provide transport to activities and events in the community.

An information sheet included in the documents provided to the committee has been distributed and explained to our members through more than 252 engagement meetings at our resource and outreach centres across the country. The IWA and HSE representatives were invited by the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, to meet on Tuesday, 12 November to provide the necessary reassurances in respect of what is a fundamentally progressive and innovative way of meeting the needs of people with disabilities who wish to avail of holiday respite breaks and to bridge the gap that will arise from the closure of Cuisle. The IWA has stressed to the Minister of State that the clear choice and preference of people with disabilities is increasingly more about having access to fully inclusive settings where existing commercial hotel provider settings implement universal design initiatives to accommodate people of all levels of ability.

It goes without saying that the new model of service will be different. It will be a big change for those who have loved going to Cuisle. We are optimistic, based on the feedback from those who have availed of our Kilkenny services, that as time goes on and people get a chance to experience this form of holiday respite break, they will see the benefits of enjoying it. The IWA has a 60-year track record of ensuring that our services meet the wants and needs of our members. We will continue to adapt and innovate to ensure that this remains true in future.

I thank the committee members for listening. Mr. Cunningham and I welcome whatever questions they may have.

Chairman: I thank Ms Keogh. This is a special meeting of the committee and we have in attendance a number of Oireachtas Members from the local area who are intimately connected with the centre. We will take them in the following order: Deputy Eugene Murphy, Senator Hopkins and Deputy Martin Kenny, all of whom are substituting for members of the committee.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I welcome Ms Keogh and Mr. Cunningham to our forum. I also welcome the many representatives of the IWA and some of our councillors from Roscommon, including Councillors Orla Leyden and Anthony Waldron. I will not hog this meeting. There are ten Oireachtas Members in attendance, all of whom are entitled to their say. I have significant questions, but I will try to be as brief as I can.

Chairman: I understand. We might give seven minutes to each member, if the Deputy might confine himself to that.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I will do that and be bound-----

Deputy Kate O'Connell: Does that include answers?

Chairman: Forwards and back, yes.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I will be bound by that. As someone who has fundraised for the IWA many times and who, through my more than 20 years of radio work before becoming an Oireachtas Member, did significant work for the IWA and gave it support and publicity, I am deeply disappointed and distraught over its moves. I will first ask about the end of Ms Keogh's presentation, for which I thank her. She stated:

The IWA has a 60-year track record of ensuring that our services meet the wants and needs of our members. We will continue to adapt and innovate to ensure that this remains true in future.

If so, why did the IWA not consult its 2,000-plus members? My understanding is that it is the advocate for service users. Why did it not consult its staff, given that this has been under discussion for two years?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: To make a correction, the IWA has 20,000 members, not 2,000. That is an important clarification.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Okay.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The IWA constantly consults its members about what they want from all of our services and everything our organisation does. Our board is composed almost entirely of IWA members. Our agenda, including our advocacy agenda, is always driven by our members. I have expressed the disappointment of the board and management of the IWA in coming to this decision. It has not been an easy one and has taken two years. Ultimately, the organisation has a legal obligation to everyone who uses the building and we cannot guarantee the safety of the building into the future. We have made extensive representations to resource the funding, but the funding was not available.

The service is not ceasing. Rather, it is changing and moving to a new model. I understand that this is disappointing and upsetting for those who are regular visitors to Cuisle and who have made many happy memories there, but there are serious issues with the building. I would challenge anyone who made any other decision in this situation. I would not want to be sitting before the committee in a year's time explaining the outcome of a fire or an electrical accident.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: That is a fair point, but why has the IWA brought the issue of the building's dangers into the arena now? I am a public representative and have been in Dáil Éireann since 2016. I have checked my records. There was no representation, letter or phone call. I brought the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, to Roscommon in 2017. It was one of the first ministerial visits that I brought to the county. We brought him to Donamon, where I met Ms Jean Coleman and members of staff. There was never any mention of a need to replace any part of the building. The Minister of State stood outside with me and the manager and said that it was a fantastic facility and that he would always be available to assist. The IWA received €39.4 million in its last budget. If Ms Keogh has the figure, how much did the IWA receive in voluntary contributions, in other words, fundraisers, throughout the country? Many of those fundraisers were in County Roscommon.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I can pull it out for the Deputy in a second. Every year, the IWA generates approximately €7 million of its own funding through a variety of activities - fundraising, our retail shops, grant sources and our social enterprises. I cannot think off the top of my head of the value of our fundraising. I have the financial statements with me, however, so I can pull the figure out for the Deputy. It is not a large amount of money and is in the region of approximately €1 million spread across all of our activities. In 2018, the IWA put €1.9 million of our own funding into supporting the continuation of services that were funded by the HSE. There is a serious deficit issue in the funding from the HSE. The HSE's funding is managed under the service arrangement process. As such, each service has a specific amount and service level allocated to it. It is not within our gift to change that without consulting the HSE. In any case, all of our services are underfunded. If we were to take money from another service, that service would be in jeopardy.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Given that I helped out with some of it, I know that the IWA has engaged in significant fundraising throughout County Roscommon, particularly in the Oran and Donamon area where the centre is located. I have figures that show €1,600 was raised at bag-packing and €5,500 was raised with a 6 km walk. Did the IWA receive any substantial private donations from people in that region?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I am not aware that we did.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I have previously said on the record that one of the beauties of the service in Cuisle is that staff are very much part of it and have developed Cuisle into what it is. We took on the building in 1997 and developed it extensively over the past 22 years. Most of that was funded by grants and local fundraising. The staff in the past year raised funds towards the matching funding for the LEADER grant, which were some of the figures to which the Deputy referred. We qualified for 75% of a €216,000 LEADER grant. We had to then raise €50,000 for that. Some €25,000 was secured through the Athlone municipal district. The remainder was fundraised locally. That fund is still there, as it was not spent. The LEADER grant was also not spent because we would have been undoing the work of the grant with the electrical works. The grant was for the upgrade and removal of the institutional look of Cuisle to try to make it more like a hotel and, therefore, more appealing to the public and more comfortable for our members. This would involve a theme running through the centre, such as a hotel, and enhancing the look of the corridors, bedrooms, en suite bathrooms and reception area, including carpets and wallpaper and so on. The problem was if one were to then do the electrical and fire-safety works, one would need to chase the wiring through the wallpaper and the carpets. We asked about this on a number of occasions and the Roscommon LEADER Partnership has worked very well with us. That fund still sits there on hold. It would have been negligent of us

to spend that money and undo a lot of the work later on. The funds that were raised were then put towards that. I am not be familiar with the entire series of smaller fundraisers. Individual staff members also run fundraising events and some people make donations and so on.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: As far as I can recall I did not get an answer to why the IWA informed its staff in Donamon so late about this decision. Am I correct that the association has some 2,300 workers in total?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: It is 2,500.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: That is close enough. There are some 20,000 members. There is no question about the way the association has treated the staff in Donamon, after all they have done and do, and with their service going way beyond the call of duty. It is fair to ask the witnesses why, if they had these problems for two years, the association did not meet the staff and local politicians? Why did the association treat the staff so shabbily in the end by not informing them until the last minute of this decision?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: It is not accurate to say staff were not aware of the decision. I attended three general staff meetings and my purpose for being there was to update the staff team on the issues and on the efforts that were being made to secure the funding. It is not my job to inform staff that a place might be closing or that we might not get funding. It damages the business and it damages morale. We tried to be as upbeat as we could in our efforts all through that period. I recall three staff meetings where we looked at that. Staff were aware of the bigger issue. I went as far as saying that if we did not get the money, I did not know what would happen, and that it was not good but we were working away on the issues. That is the information we gave and I have said this at other meetings.

It has been asked why this is happening at this point in time. I was at the meeting and it was devastating. There is no right time, be it 1 January or 1 December. It was one of the toughest things I was ever involved in. With regard to the time of the year, it has come after we were sure there was no funding coming. At this time of year, Cuisle usually closes for most of December, January and into February. A month's notice was agreed to pay people for the additional notice period as required. There is no right time and it has been devastating for the staff. It was the end of the road. As Ms Keogh said, the board has the legal responsibility for everybody's safety in the building. We cannot guarantee that now. This is why the issue was discussed at so many board meetings in the past two years, including our efforts to secure the funding.

I also refer to her point about the financial position in the organisation. Our fundraising efforts around the country were to maintain essential services, and this was covered at a meeting here some weeks ago. The association does not have the money to do these works. We do not own the building. It is leased, and the lease will be out in a few years. Accessibility has improved in the community. I am at a loss about what to say to the staff. I have met many of them on a one-to-one or group basis and there are no words for it.

As Ms Keogh said, the service is looking at transitioning into the community. The first place we looked at was Roscommon with regard to hotels and how that might create opportunities for the staff locally as a redeployment option. This was not possible in Roscommon because the necessary accessibility, the numbers of rooms and the interest in partnering with us was not there. We are also looking at places such as Ballinasloe, which is a commutable distance, where we looked at redeployment options for people. Originally, we were considering two hotels - one in Galway city and one in Ballinasloe - but to create more sustainable jobs for

redeployment, we went for a longer, full-year effect in Ballinasloe to start with. These are the redeployment opportunities we have put out there for people, our colleagues, and the uptake on that is very low. One can always do things differently, and everyone could say that. There is no right way of doing it. I am at a loss in one way.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I want to focus on two major issues, one of which relates to the funding. I have gone through the witnesses' supplementary information on LEADER grants, assistance from the Athlone municipal district and the moneys on hold. I am quite confused about that.

I met the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, on 12 November 2019. I would like clarification on the funding. I was informed by him that the IWA board had approved €65,000 to commence immediate fire safety issues. This meeting happened in July 2017. The organisation, however, required the balance of €423,862 by the end of September 2017. I understand that the HSE advised the IWA that its funding application would be escalated to the HSE head of operations for disability services. I was advised by the Minister of State at the meeting on 12 November that the IWA confirmed that the work would be planned on a phased basis so the centre would not close. He also advised that he had been informed by the HSE head of operations - I refer to email correspondence I have - that funding was provided at that time. Will the witnesses indicate if this funding was provided? If it was provided, was it drawn down? Why were approved moneys put on hold if there were serious issues relating to fire safety and electrical work?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: With regard to the meeting Senator Hopkins had with the Minister of State, can I confirm that it was 12 November this year?

Senator Maura Hopkins: Yes.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: In 2018, the IWA board approved a €65,000 initial spend of its own funding to carry out the works that were required immediately, and those works were carried out. The €423,000 figure was estimated in 2017-18 before we brought in the engineers and the quantity surveyors. When we had the professional advice, the total cost of the work was estimated at €1.15 million. At no point did the HSE approve funding for the IWA for capital works in Cuisle. That is all I can say on it. I do not know of any conversation between the Minister of State and the HSE. In all our engagement with the HSE on this issue over the past two years, it has been clear that it cannot provide any funding for the capital works in Cuisle.

Senator Maura Hopkins: Ms Keogh is making it clear that the €423,862 was not approved.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: It was not approved by the HSE, absolutely not.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: On the LEADER grant, I clarified at a previous meeting that we had started with applying for the LEADER grant when the electrical works came up. Jean Coleman, the manager of Cuisle, and I went to LEADER to ask if we could change the application to go towards the electrical works. I have clarified this since with LEADER because it came up recently in Cuisle. I knew the facts but I just went back to them. We were informed that, under the EU rules, LEADER funding could not be used for statutory requirements in terms of building compliance so we could not change it over. It would be different if as part of the upgrade we were doing up a few lights in a room, from a small, aesthetical point of view. It came up at the meeting recently in Cuisle and I rang LEADER on the way home to confirm that

was the situation still and they confirmed it.

Senator Maura Hopkins: Mr. Cunningham is saying that it was not possible to draw down the funding and that it is not on hold.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: It was not possible; it is on hold. Our application went in for what I will call the wallpaper, for enhancing the look of the building in Cuisle, to lift all of that. We called it a major renovation project. That was literally for putting in accessible doors at the front and for doing up the corridors, some bedrooms and en suites - that type of softer stuff. That is what the LEADER grant was for and it was part of the strategy that we have talked about. We had engaged a sales and marketing officer to work with Cuisle. We had travelled the UK to see the project Revitalise Respite Holidays had done. We had developed our website built on the branding. We were preparing for that external market to create a more inclusive environment and to generate the income to support the delivery of services because we are a section 39 organisation. We went back to LEADER to ask for clarity. We said that if there were no electrics, there would be no need for wallpaper. It is not just about wallpaper, I am just throwing that in, but there would be no need for the softer things. We were told categorically that the funding could not be used. The Senator can check that with Roscommon LEADER Partnership. It is a different fund altogether.

Senator Maura Hopkins: We are quite confused about the exact reasoning with regard to this closure. I have spoken about the works that Mr. Cunningham has said are required. I am going to move on in terms of the model of care. The opening statement indicates that it is about providing a wide range of choice to people with disabilities. I find that very disingenuous in the context of the many people who have contacted me and, I am sure, others here in regard to the service that is provided in Cuisle. I do not think that is very reflective of providing clear choice in what is being presented today. I would like our guests to speak specifically about the wide range of choices they are providing. I have worked as an occupational therapist so I am very aware of the needs of people with disabilities. The opening statement says the service “will provide support to guests on a tailored individual basis” and “will ensure guests have fully accessible en suite bedrooms”. I would like to know where the hotels are. Are they set up to facilitate people? Are staff in place? I would like a little bit more information about the Kilkenny model. How many people has it facilitated since it was set up? How many beds are in place there? We have really little to no evidence in terms of closure of one service and providing a better replacement service. That is why we are extremely concerned. Staff are concerned, service users are concerned, families are concerned, public representatives are concerned. I would like specific answers. There was a reference to Ballinasloe. Is Ballinasloe set up? Is there provision of en suite bedrooms, specialised beds, hoists, support with medication management, and clinical tasks? Are all of those set up? We know that people have varying needs. Surely the IWA, as was also outlined in the opening statement, wants to provide low, medium and high-level support?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: There are a number of questions there. I will do my best to answer them all in the time allowed. The first thing I will say when it comes to choice of service is that closing Cuisle is not a choice that the IWA wanted to make. If the building was safe and secure for use into the future this decision would not have been made. It was made because it is not safe to continue to operate a service there and unfortunately we do not have the funding to rectify that and no State agency has been able to offer us that funding.

In terms of the service, we talk about how we will provide for people. We are providing this service fully in Kilkenny currently. We have people who visit the service in Kilkenny. I visited

it earlier this year and stayed with a group of IWA guests who were there at the time whose needs varied from the very low to the very high. IWA staff are in the hotel with the visitors 24-7. IWA-trained personal assistants who are doing this type of work day in, day out and have been for many years are providing the service in the hotels to our guests. All of the equipment that is needed is provided by the IWA. We bring in fully adjustable hoists that will go from bed to bathroom and fully en suite rooms. We are providing clinical care and medication management. We are currently providing all of the services currently provided in Cuisle, albeit on a much smaller scale, in our service in Kilkenny. We will be able to replicate, develop and grow those services and continue to add more services to our members in the three new hotels we will be operating from March 2020.

Chairman: I thank Ms Keogh. We are going to have to move on.

Senator Maura Hopkins: If I might ask one more quick question, it is important. Ms Keogh is saying that if this funding was in place, the decision would be different. Am I correct?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: If the IWA had been able to attain the funding to do the works we would not be closing Cuisle at this point, no.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend the IWA on the good work it has done over many years for thousands of people. Many questions have already been asked. Really what I am a little bit perplexed about is this change of model from a purpose-built centre with people who have skills that they have honed over many years and who have developed a service which by all account from the service users and their families is first class and which they want to maintain, and moving to a model which apart from the experimental model in Kilkenny is pretty much untested. That concerns me greatly. I see the sheet here which says that the hotel respite breaks are available in various places. I just contacted a couple of hotels this morning. I rang them and asked what the story would be if somebody in a wheelchair with particular needs and who requires a hoist were to book accommodation. I will not name the four hotels I contacted but all of them basically said, "No, not a hope." That was just *ad hoc* but it is the experience of an awful lot of the families of those who have chronic conditions and significant needs and who need to have a care atmosphere around them. Cuisle has provided that when nowhere else could provide it.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Absolutely.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Following on from Senator Hopkins' question, Ms Keogh said that had funding been available, we would not be in this position. If funding becomes available, can the IWA change its position?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I cannot change the position. It is a decision of the board of the IWA. I can certainly bring any proposal regarding funding to the board, but it is not in my remit to change that decision.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The association does not own the building.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: That is correct.

Deputy Martin Kenny: That is one of the difficulties. I understand that the people who own the building are prepared to assist in any way they can in regard to guarantees or whatever else in the future to help with being able to secure finance or assistance from whomever. In many of these cases, the State plays its part and the voluntary sector plays its part, as does everybody else. It is about getting the right mix, co-ordinating it properly and trying to find a

model that will work and deliver. Ms Keogh is telling us that, despite the association's best efforts - and we will take that at face value although there are others who would say otherwise - it has not been able to do that up to now. Given the profile this issue has attained in the past few weeks, does she believe that, between now and Christmas, we could be in a position to work out a solution? Would the board be open to that?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The Deputy covered a number of matters. I will take each in turn before getting to the last one. He spoke about the telephone calls he had made to the hotels. If one rings any hotel in Ireland and asks if they have hoists, they will say they do not have them. I refer to what is unique about the IWA's model of service. I challenge the assumption that it is an experimental model. It has been in place for more than 18 months and it is constantly fully booked. We cannot keep up with the demand for the service. I believe we have gone past experimental at this point.

As regards the hotels we are working with in Kilkenny and those we will be working with in the new model for people who have previously visited Cuisle, we concluded the procurement process with those hotels yesterday. We will be able to provide the same number of bed nights that were HSE funded in Cuisle in 2019 and into 2020. That is 1,700 bed nights, and probably more than that as things grow.

With regard to equipment, hoists, beds and so forth, the IWA provides all the equipment in the hotel environment. If people wish to book a break through the IWA, they call our regional respite manager, say where and when they want to go and how many people wish to go. We go into great detail with them about their requirements, be it medication, clinical tasks, personal assistant service, equipment and so forth, and we provide it on site. The people who work for the IWA providing that service are part of our personal assistance services. The association provides 1.2 million personal assistance hours on behalf of the HSE every year. It is by far the largest provider of personal assistance services in Ireland. We know how to do this and we do it well.

In the context of the decision for the board and whether we could bring something back to the board if funding became available, if there is a realistic proposal on the table we will bring it back. We have not seen anything in that regard at this point. The only caveat I would add is that, at present, the estimate we have for the cost of works is €1.15 million. We are greatly concerned that if we start pulling down walls, ripping out fuse boards and so forth, the asbestos in the building will be disturbed. If that happens, we are facing an inestimable cost and the question of who will pay for it.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank Ms Keogh. The other issue is that the people we deal with here, the users of the service whom the association very generously works with, are people who do not have many choices in their lives. One of the points they are making to public representatives is that it is their choice to have a special place, which Cuisle provided. That is what they want. There is a responsibility on us as public representatives and also on the association to do everything we can to deliver that choice. We must try to move this forward in that context. All Members of the Oireachtas would play their part in trying to move it forward. However, I am still slightly perplexed about the board. One of the matters that has come through in all of this, and it appears to be the case for everyone we talked to, is that people were unaware that it was at this level of crisis until very recently. If this crisis was developing, we would have thought that the board, conscious of the possibility of having to close this centre, would be shouting from the rooftops much sooner to try to resolve the situation.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We have been engaging with public representatives on this issue since early in 2017. It is over two years at this point.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: On a point of order, I wish to make it clear that the association did not contact me. I have been a Deputy since 2016. I cannot let that statement go unchallenged. I know others who were not approached.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: At no point did the IWA say that it contacted Deputy Eugene Murphy, nor did it say it contacted Senator Hopkins. We have laid out who we contacted very clearly in our supplementary information. We were in contact with two Ministers very early and both of them ultimately directed us towards HSE capital. The HSE is our funder and we dealt with the HSE through the normal protocol. We did not know until recently that there would be no funding available. We were in a process with the HSE and the Government over the last two years on this matter. We did not deliberately not contact anybody. As we were dealing directly with members of the Cabinet we felt that we had raised it to the highest point possible. There is certainly no intention-----

Senator Terry Leyden: On a point of order, as a long-serving Roscommon Senator I was not contacted, even though I worked with the association and received and paid funds in the past. I thank the association for its contact with me about this.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: May I respond?

Chairman: I am sorry, Deputy Martin Kenny has to conclude.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I will follow up on that. The association contacted Ministers or senior people in the Government. That was its choice. Did it make them aware of how serious this crisis was becoming? If any of the rest of us were in those positions and were made aware that it was going to come to this, I expect we would have ensured that we did not find ourselves in a position where the association was talking about closing a facility that is the choice of the people who need it.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: In fairness to everybody and to those we contacted, we outlined the position with the works - we did not even realise the scope of the works at that point - and that we required the money. The protocol was to go through the HSE. That was a given and we went through it at that early stage, so we would not have had a follow-up with everybody. That is the avenue we took. We engaged immediately. I met Department of Health officials and the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath. They ultimately directed us to the HSE. The Deputies I met spoke about their support for the project and said they would communicate their support to the Minister of State as well. We have been working with the HSE since then.

The landscape has changed. Take the example of the national children's hospital and the funding required for that. Ms Keogh outlined the financial position in which we found ourselves. Pay restoration for the sector was a major issue and had a big impact on the association. That lobbying was taking place and was a pressure on the system, the HSE and the Department. There was the underfunding of services and the increasing costs due to regulation, including insurance alone. The external environment changed along the way but we had been following the recognised route for funding through the HSE for an organisation such as ours.

Deputy Martin Kenny: How many bed nights were being provided per year?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Historically, it would have been 8,000 to 9,000, but we are down

to fewer than 4,000 now. For clarity, they are not all HSE funded bed nights. The 1,770 is the HSE element that we can deliver. In the context of what we are discussing here, which is like for like, we will be delivering those. Then there is the private part where groups and individuals pay for themselves. We will be dealing with them separately.

Deputy Martin Kenny: If this funding was in place and it is spread out over ten years, taking 4,000 bed nights per year it is approximately €30 per bed per night that the State would have to fund. We take it that it would be for ten years. It would be very good value and ensure that we have choice for the people who want that choice.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: This is very important. Ms Keogh is right and I have said publicly on numerous occasions that the board and the association would not have decided at this point to move from Cuisle except for the situation that we find ourselves in. The design team is made up of electrical engineers, who were brought in first, fire safety consultants, the quantity surveyor and the architect. People asked where the €1.15 million in known costs comes from. There is a question of whether that calculation and those drawings exist. I presented all of that to the landlords. There is an issue regarding procurement and EU directives. It is not rocket science that we cannot throw out a lot of information. People say that the money will come and the works will be done, whether by the Irish Wheelchair Association or the landlord. We have invested substantially in bringing this to where it is. I met the landlord last week with my colleague and we shared all the work done to date. The landlord was very satisfied with the financial investment that the association had made to bring it to that point. We showed the landlord all the drawings and specifications for the electrical and fire safety works. The unknowns are the big concern, bearing in mind that it is a leased building. We had an asbestos report done and there is both known and unknown asbestos. Unknown means that the heating system is probably all insulated with asbestos, because the building is from the 1960s. I do not know how many members have been to Cuisle. Deputies Harty and Naughten know it. It is a huge, three storey building. There is a long corridor to another building. It is more than 3,000 sq. m in size. If the heating system fails, that would cost hundreds of thousands more.

When we looked at our investment and planning, we were looking at a long-term facility. Sales and marketing work was done. The website was developed. Our vision was that this would grow bigger and better over time. The energy rating in the building is pretty poor, but people focus on the beautiful views from the windows. There are huge windows in every bedroom and the heat flies out through them. It is a mass concrete building, and that has to be considered. If one is doing work on one's own home, one will look at the bigger picture to see if it is worth doing up the house or if it is better to knock it down and build a new one. While we talk about €1.15 million to address known issues, that is all we will do. To go back to the question of what we would do if we got the money in the morning, we would have to consider that it is an estimate of €1.15 million. I am told that it could be 5% more because that estimate was a year ago. It is only when it goes to tender that one knows what the actual price will be. It has to be considered whether it is worth doing it. The lease goes until 2026. The Divine Word is open to extending that further and we asked it about the matter previously. If that money is invested and the heating fails, what will happen? The process has been verified with the HSE and the Department of Health, and the IWA does not have money for this.

Senator John Dolan: I thank the committee for having this meeting focused on this issue. I have a special grá for Cuisle. I was involved when it was a musty old seminary that had not been used for two decades. It brought back other memories for me but those are not the business of this meeting. I will tell Mr. Cunningham that the building has mass concrete walls

internally, for the en suites, which was a surprising find at the time. I first heard about this when people with disabilities on social media engaged with me. They were very sad, upset and worried about it. Added to that were people from a number of organisations for Huntington's disease, spina bifida, ataxia and such like. The Chairman is a medical doctor and has particular understanding of the complexities of some of those issues and the stigma related to them for people as they advance, and all of the different elements of some of those and other conditions.

While I knew this already, it has been said to me again over the past couple of weeks that Cuisle was a home from home. It was a safe place where the staff were people's family. As somebody with polio, it is important for me to have time out with others with polio, to give out about doctors, medics and consultants and who is the best one to go to, save in the Chairman's presence. People can exchange how they work things out and what works for them. It is more than gossip. There could be many more places using the hotel model, but something would be missing if there was no Cuisle. The association said that if it had the money to keep Cuisle going and this issue had not arisen, its intention was to keep the show on the road. We need to come back to that, whether today or after today.

There is much local, community and political interest in what Cuisle is and the value that it has had. I regularly travel to various countries in Europe. Not only is there no Cuisle anywhere else in Ireland but I have not heard of one anywhere else in Europe. It is a gem. Following up on what Deputy Kenny has said, people are raw, sour and hurting about what has happened over the past month or so. From an employer's point of view, nobody likes making people redundant. I made five people redundant in my own organisation in the past five or six months. Deputy Kenny talked about the level of crisis. It is not just that Cuisle is an issue. The Irish Wheelchair Association runs personal assistance services that it cannot keep up with. There is a crisis across the whole platform of funding for people with disabilities. Everyone in the Oireachtas knows that from the representations they get, and we try to plug holes in places.

A number of statements have been made by our witnesses. Can we find a way to have them signed off? They referred to what they have received from the LEADER programme and such. Can we find a way to agree what playing pitch we are on and to confirm what the IWA said about the sums of money, such as the €400,000? There is great interest in solving this issue here and people with disabilities keenly want it to be solved. Any chief executive such as myself cannot speak for an organisation's board when the board has not yet made a decision but has to play the ball he or she is given. The reason for the decision related to funding. If the issue of funding can be decommissioned, there is a possibility that we could get back in action. I do not want to overplay that but this needs other players. It is clear the people in government and in the HSE have not yet put their hands in their pockets for the money, or even returned to say the figure is inflated and that it will cost only €500,000. Is that fair to say? Has anybody contradicted the figure of €1.15 million?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Nobody has contradicted it. We stand over the statements we have made on the LEADER funding and the assertion made to Senator Hopkins in respect of the HSE offering the IWA €400,000 at one stage. It did not make such an offer and that is all I can tell the committee in that regard.

On the assurances needed, the IWA is not the body to give those assurances. We can tell the committee about our interactions but that is all we can do. We cannot speak for any other organisation and it for other organisations to speak for themselves. As I stated in my opening statement, everybody is sad about the decision. Nobody wanted it to come to this. Cuisle has been part of the fabric of the IWA for 22 years and the Senator was involved in establishing it

in the 1990s. It has been a difficult time for our board members. I remind the committee that a number of our board members regularly holiday at Cuisle and were among the people who made the decision. It has not been an easy decision for anybody to make.

The Senator talked about Cuisle being a safe place. I hope we have demonstrated during the meeting that, unfortunately, Cuisle will no longer be a safe place in respect of the structure of the building and related issues. I reiterate that even if the funding was to become available, €1.15 million is not the solution to the problem. The figure is €1.15 million based on our current estimates, which are now one year old. We would also need assurances that if the sum is larger, asbestos is uncovered, there are issues with the water treatment works or whatever else there might be, there will have to be enforceable commitments that the funding will also be available into the future. Otherwise, in a year's time, having drawn down the €1.15 million, we could rip the building asunder and discover we will need another €1 million.

Senator John Dolan: The other issue is that 40 jobs are on the line. I do not know anyone currently working at Cuisle but I knew people who were there at the start. Cuisle's success has been partly, albeit significantly, helped by the attitude, orientation and approach of the people working there. Over the years, the people of Roscommon have come to know about Cuisle and it is an important issue. I will not make a case that might be made by a trade union but rather a business case. If we cannot keep Cuisle, it will not just be the building that will have to be replaced but the more difficult part will have to be replaced, namely, the calibrated and qualified staff. I do not refer even to staff with professional qualifications but instead to people who know what the organisation is about. That unquantified asset will be lost. I would like us to leave the meeting having cleared out the ground, in order that we will know exactly what we have agreed on and understand, to see how we can all get stuck in and keep the show on the road.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I thank our guests for appearing before the committee. Mr. Cunningham moved quickly from talking about asbestos to heating and was at pains to talk about the possibility that the cost might be much higher than €1.15 million. Is there any substantial expert opinion to suggest there could be unknown high costs associated with asbestos?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: We commissioned a report. To clarify, I am not a professional in the area of design-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: I would like a brief answer.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: When the design team became involved its assessment, due to the nature of the building, was that we would have to undertake an asbestos survey of the building in order that when people came in to work on the building, we would have identified in advance any obvious areas of asbestos and of concern.

Senator Rónán Mullen: There is no substantial reason to believe there could be significant further costs associated with asbestos. Is that correct?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: No, my point was we have a report that identifies where asbestos is obvious and where it might be located.

Senator Rónán Mullen: It concerns me that on the one hand, I heard language to suggest that it breaks the IWA's heart that Cuisle may have to close, and Mr. Cunningham led strongly with the figure of €1.15 million. Towards the end of the IWA's presentation, however, I heard the alternative, on which we have not heard much detail, being presented as progressive and innovative, as if to suggest that what is going on at Cuisle is not progressive. It worries me that

that is the language of people trying to build a case for a decision they have made. It also worries me that when our guests spoke about having been upbeat in their efforts, or when they said to staff that if they did not get the money, they do not know what they would do, that is a “don’t frighten the horses” type of approach that I do not regard as a professional approach to saving a service. If the IWA is serious about getting money from the State or other sources, the political machinery will involve going public with the risks, dangers and needs at an early stage, and it certainly will not involve tip-toeing around and saying to staff, “Gosh, I do not know what will happen” and so on, while perhaps the board gets ready for a decision it will have to take, as sure as there is a cross in an ass.

Was the effort high on spin and low on consultation? When, for example, did the Divine Word Missionaries become aware that the IWA was seriously considering the possibility of closing the service? I refer to one important stakeholder.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We have engaged with the Divine Word Missionaries on the matter since 2017-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: The missionaries were aware there was a risk of closure.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Yes.

Senator Rónán Mullen: On funding to save Cuisle, our guests mentioned they had engaged with the State but were vague in their presentation. They talked about two years of trying to find an alternative solution. Did the IWA ask the Divine Word Missionaries to become involved, or for any other source of private funding to assist in a rescue effort?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Within the supplementary information we provided to the committee, there is a detailed list of all the engagements we had with political representatives. Our overriding-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: Political representatives-----

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I am not finished. I ask that the Senator allow me to finish, please. I did not interrupt him and I ask that he not interrupt me.

We engaged with the Divine Word Missionaries two years ago and made them aware of the issues. After some negotiation with us, they offered to fund €125,000 towards the work. They made it clear that was the maximum amount they would be able to provide and, as recently as the past two weeks, confirmed it was the maximum amount they will be able to provide.

As for the Senator’s earlier comment on our description of the new service as progressive and innovative, and his assumption that we mean that Cuisle is not progressive and innovative, it is wholly incorrect. When Cuisle was established, it was an innovative, new service the IWA developed that no other organisation or Government body provided. We are always innovative and progressive. That we are innovative and progressive now does not mean that other steps we take are not innovative and progressive. I take-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: Ms Keogh has confirmed that the only issue is the money.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Yes.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Will she further confirm that the IWA is not prevented by any contracts or engagements it has entered with future providers of the alternative service from

revisiting the decision, should the possibility of money to save Cuisle come on board?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I do not fully understand the question. The Senator might clarify it.

Senator Rónán Mullen: If there were serious efforts from the Government or other sources to try to find the resources to save the Cuisle facility, will Ms Keogh confirm that the IWA would not revert with arguments to the effect that given it has entered engagements with new providers, it would be in breach of contractual commitments, or anything like that?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I return to what we stated earlier. If there is a realistic opportunity for ongoing funding to be provided, naturally, the IWA will take up the offer. The Senator talked about our engagement with political machinery. The disability sector has engaged actively with political machinery for more than ten years, while all the organisations in the sector have experienced increasing deficits due to underfunding.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Agreed.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The political machinery has not done much to resolve that so forgive me if my faith in political machinery is not very strong.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Sorry, but when I speak of political machinery I am talking about being open with the staff that the centre could close and not just saying “I do not know what we will do”. I am talking about going to the media and saying Cuisle is in danger of closing in a couple of years if we do not raise X amount of money. The Divine Word Missionaries are in for €125,000 and that leaves a shortfall. It appears from everything the witness has said so far that there have been board meetings preparing for the announcement but the approach with regard to the staff is not to frighten the horses. Knowing which politicians the centre has engaged with would be helpful.

Generally speaking, when voluntary organisations are at risk of closing - and we have had this only this year - they go public very quickly. I speak of political machinery in the form of getting the public onside for something the organisation wants to achieve. I am wondering if the witnesses really wanted to save the Cuisle centre and if they did, why we were all not hearing strongly that the service, including the 48 jobs, was at risk. I am not just speaking about the political class but rather the public at large.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The Irish Wheelchair Association receives its funding for the services we provide through the Health Service Executive. The Senator said it would be helpful to have a list of the political representatives we engaged with but that is included in the supplementary pack. It is all there.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I thank the witness.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The Senator asks if the board of the Irish Wheelchair Association was preparing for the closure. In 2018, the board of the Irish Wheelchair Association agreed to invest in developing the sales and marketing and branding of Cuisle. We put in €65,000 of the IWA's money to do the initial remedial works as a demonstration of our commitment to continuing the service but that was always going to be contingent on us having the money. We deal with the HSE and we are contracted to provide services for it. We went to public representatives who referred us back to the HSE and we have gone through the channels we are required to work under as part of the service arrangements process. It was always our intention to keep Cuisle open and there was no long-term plan to close it. I restate that everybody in the IWA,

including the staff, board, management and, most important, the guests and service users of the centre are devastated about where we have come to.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I do not understand how an organisation can go from wanting to keep a service going to the point where there is no public statement about being at risk, with a sudden decision to close. I hope the witnesses are now engaging in a process of trying to save it. We should all put our backs into examining whether a solution could be found. Will Ms Keogh name two or three of the facilities that will be used for the hotel respite breaks?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I can name them now because we concluded those discussions yesterday. The hotels we are engaging are the Shearwater Hotel in Ballinasloe, the County Arms Hotel in Birr in County Offaly and the Clayton Hotel at Ballybrit in County Galway.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Were there to be a developed approach to trying to save Cuisle, what would be the status of those agreements? If people were looking at saving the Cuisle facility so it could operate in 2020, what would be the position with those businesses? Have contracts been signed?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: No. Our preferred model would be to do both.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Okay. I thank Ms Keogh.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I welcome our witnesses and thank them for the presentation. A number of questions come to mind, although we appreciate the work done by the Irish Wheelchair Association and the work done in Donamon. I am familiar with the facility over a long number of years. How many board members are there?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We have 15 board members.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: When the decision was taken, were all of board members in favour of it? Was it a unanimous decision?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: All 15 board members were present and it was a unanimous decision.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The next question clearly follows. How firm are the arrangements that have already been entered into? For example, do they relate to the lease? I refer to the alternative arrangements and what they are. Are they commercially sensitive? Ms Keogh mentioned three hotels. Do they involve the lease of services?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: No.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Is the process just an individual arrangement?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The Irish Wheelchair Association has engaged with these three hotels and we have satisfied ourselves that they have a level of accessibility that is suitable for the people who avail of the IWA's holiday services. When somebody wants to book a holiday in the hotel model, it is done through the Irish Wheelchair Association. We link directly with the hotels and we have an agreement with them that we will book up to a certain number of rooms per year, although we are not bound by that. We do not have to do it and if the demand was not there, we would not have to pay for all those hotel rooms. We would pay for them as they are used.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The hotels operate as ordinary commercial entities.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Absolutely.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The association must book in advance so the hotel in question can make arrangements. When did the board make its decision?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: It was on 18 October.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: When did the association start negotiating with the other hotels?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: There is a broad answer to that one. We started with the Kilkenny model.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Was it last May?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: No, the Kilkenny model is open for over a year. Once it was set up we saw it was a great success. We were looking to expand that around the country. For example, the HSE area in the south had expressed an interest and we put a proposal together for it. The funding has not come forward at this point but it is looking to source the funding to operate a similar model in the south using a hotel facility. We always had members and people from Ireland and abroad contacting us and looking for details of accessible hotels. We were looking to see if we could roll this out around the country so people could have more options.

It is not about the hotels. In 1997 there was a lack of accessibility in general and even at shops there may have been steps at the doors. Shopping centres and hotels are now more accessible and they are around the country.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: With respect, I did not ask that. I did not ask about steps at hotels, shops or anywhere else. On the decision to take an alternative route, from what I and others have garnered, it appears that was made a year ago at least.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: No.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The substantive decision appears to have been made at least a year ago and commitments were entered into with hotels, or at least the hotel in Kilkenny. Did the organisation then go back to the landlords? I presume the lease has conditions for reviews every two, five or ten years, for example. Did the organisation involve itself in any discussion with the landlords with a view to working out a lease that would be more favourably disposed to carrying on with the facility that the organisation had on foot of a reduction in the rent?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I will answer the hotel question first and we might speak about the landlords in the Cuisle centre then. Approximately three or four months ago, when we were at a point that we were really concerned about funding not being available for Cuisle, we started exploring what other hotels were accessible in the west of Ireland. If we came to a point where we had to make the decision to close the Cuisle centre because of the lack of funding, we would be prepared to offer our guests and service users an alternative model of service as soon as possible. It is not true that the decision was made a year ago and I have already stated that in 2018, the board made a decision to invest in the Cuisle centre and complete the works subject to funding becoming available. The Kilkenny process started 18 months ago and it is not related to Cuisle. We were fortunate in that we had already developed the model and it has given us something to build on and provide an alternative service for people who go to Cuisle.

We entered negotiations with the landlords and in 2018 they offered to extend the lease. Had we been able to avail of the funding, we would have accepted the offer to extend the lease and do the works.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Did the organisation incorporate within those discussions the possibility of reduced rents in return for investment, which would have been of benefit to the landlords?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Just to clarify, the rent on the 25-year lease on Cuisle was paid up-front at the outset. As a result, there is not currently an ongoing rental cost.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: That is a most extraordinary lease.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I was still in school at the time, so I cannot explain it.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: How much was that lease?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: It was €125,000. That is the money that the Divine Word Missionaries were offering to return to the IWA to part-fund the works.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: For how many years?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: For 25 years.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: A sum of €125,000 over 25 years.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Yes.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The IWA was in a very good position to negotiate further, subject to the availability of funds, and-----

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We did so.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Wait a second. Unfortunately, our job is to ask questions.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Of course, and we are answering them.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: That is good. I will come to a conclusion very shortly. Are any philanthropists well-disposed towards the operation and have they produced much support over the 25 years?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We are not funded by any large funders. Most of our funding comes via local community support. It is primarily made up of small donations. Unfortunately, there is no very wealthy philanthropist who gives significant funds to the association.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Has the IWA sought such a person?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Absolutely. In the past two years we have done quite extensive work, particularly in trying to source people from the area who might be able to support us. Unfortunately, we have not succeeded in sourcing any funding from those people but we have tried.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am coming to the end. What specifically is the money in hand, which was promised and is still available for use, for?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I am not sure I fully understand the question.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Mention was made of an offer of funding from the-----

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Is the Deputy referring to the LEADER funding?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Yes. Where is that money now? What is it doing? I presume it is available to the IWA.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Correct.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Is it available in the revised system or the hotel system?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: The LEADER funding to which I think the Deputy is referring is €216,000, or 75% thereof. We have raised matching funds from the Athlone municipal district and local fundraising. That was for refurbishment, the softer stuff that cannot be included in electrical expenses. That work is on hold for the moment. The funding cannot be spent on electrics.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: So that cannot be drawn down.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: It could be drawn down in the morning and those works could be done. However, we would still have to undo them.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Will the landlord be able to draw them down?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I do not know how the LEADER programme works where the IWA is concerned.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Are those funds specifically dedicated to the building?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: They are for the building. We had to go through the tender process to get the costings, etc., for that particular project. Anyone who has dealt with tendering will know that it is quite extensive. I wish to make another clarification. This is an elephant in the room of which people might not be aware. It is to do with the Donamon campus, particularly Donamon Castle. I am not sure who has been to Donamon and who has not, but I note that the site includes the Divine Word Missionaries castle at the gate. That is the private residence of the priests who live there. When we were having these discussions there were only four people living in the castle. I stress that we have a very positive relationship with them. That order also has a print works on site. Divine Word Missionaries' environment in Ireland has very much changed. This is the order's view. Part of our discussions with the order concerned the whole campus. At one point its members encouraged us to take on the castle as a fundraising asset. The inside of the castle is absolutely beautiful. It has stucco ceilings, if that is what they are called. We have surveyed every inch of it, from the roof down to the basements.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Did the IWA investigate the availability of grant aid for it?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: The Divine Word Missionaries outlined the dilemma concerning their position in Ireland. They have to consider their course in the future. In my view the property is a liability and not an asset. At one point during a meeting I asked them, tongue in cheek, if they would gift the whole site to us.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Was that as a purchase?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: No, as a gift. At this point, we had talked about the property as a liability. We moved on from that and looked at the castle from top to bottom. We brought down our property projects manager and the previous CEO. If memory serves me correctly, the Divine Word Missionaries had spent something of the order of €60,000 at that stage trying to find leaks where water was coming through the roof, either through the pointing in the stones or the parapets. Fr. Pat Hogan told me that he had been woken up one night by an unmerciful bang. He came out to find the ceiling of the hall had collapsed. There is asbestos in the building. However, it is a private residence. Once it becomes a public building it will be subject to a different set of regulations.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: That may well be the case. Is Mr. Cunningham aware of the fact that even as a private residence, the castle would attract the support of certain grant aid?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Quite possibly, yes. As a listed building-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I want to ask my final question as other people wish to contribute.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Let me say that, as a listed building-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am aware of all that.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Is the Deputy aware of what I am going to say?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I know Donamon. Mr. Cunningham might not think I do, but I do.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: However, the Deputy is not aware of our discussions.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Why has the number of bed nights been reduced from 9,000 to 4,500 or 4,000?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: There are probably several reasons for that. It is partly to do with people having greater access to other venues around the country than they would have had in 1997. Another reason is a lack of disposable income among people with disabilities. The Cuisle facility is not fully funded. We get a contribution from the HSE towards the cost of running Cuisle. The rest of our costs have to be met from guest contributions or from our catering business, our bar or other independent guests who might visit. We had the BDO business plan drawn up to see how to attract more external income to subsidise the service, which was in deficit. All of those factors operate together. Some of the decrease is because people are accessing holidays abroad or in other hotels in Ireland. That is a reality which we accept. Part of the reason concerns budgets. We do not have the funding to support people. Another part of it concerns our limited staffing at Cuisle. There are only so many staff members available to support people with various requirements.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Would individuals qualify for respite grants when they attend?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Independently, but where they spend it is up to them.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I ask the Chairman to follow up on the question about respite grants. I refer also to personal assistance. To what extent can guests avail of that funding?

Chairman: Before we move onto our next group of speakers - Deputy Naughten, Senator Leyden, Deputy Bríd Smith and Deputy Fitzmaurice - I have two questions. From what I gather the IWA is running two models of care. One is Cuisle and the other makes use of hotels around the country. What proportion of guests, clients or service users go to Cuisle as opposed to going to hotels? Has the proportion of service users using hotels as opposed to Cuisle increased?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I do not have specific figures on that. However, this is related to Deputy Durkan's question on why we have gone from 9,000 bed-nights to 4,000 in the last ten years. The Kilkenny hotel model was set up for a very specific purpose 18 months ago. We have 57 resource and outreach centres located throughout the country. The IWA members and service users who attend those centres all go on holidays supported by IWA every year, some of them several times a year. In the past ten years, we have found that more and more of those people choose to go abroad on a holiday, or choose to stay in a hotel for a holiday. We have definitely seen an increased demand for the hotel model. That said, we fully accept that for some people Cuisle is a very special place and it is their preference.

Chairman: How much money has been invested by Cuisle over the years and will now be effectively written off?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I will ask Mr. Cunningham to go into detail on some of the numbers there. That money has been invested over a 22-year period. From an accounting point of view, some of it has already been written off in capital write-downs. I will let Mr. Cunningham talk a bit more about that.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: In broad terms, we have invested about €3 million since 1997. Going back to the lease agreement at the time, I must clarify that the rent was IR£125,000.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I beg the members' pardon.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: However, we were getting it back in euro. One condition of the lease was that we would put a new roof on the main building. That work was completed. Waste-water treatment was also a factor. I do not know whether one might call them cells - Senator Dolan referred to them from his time - but the €3 million covered knocking two bedrooms-----

Senator John Dolan: Rooms for reflection.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: -----into one with an en suite. There are also track hoists, furniture, buses and other assets for our organisation that we can take with us and use to support members in different locations.

Chairman: The IWA invested substantially more in the building than it would take to renovate it based on the last design process.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Yes, but much of that would have depreciated over time.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Cunningham. I will next call Deputy Naughten, Senator Leyden and Deputies Smith and Fitzmaurice.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Thirty days notice was given to staff, some of who had have 20 years of service. Do our guests believe that this was right, particularly as they have admitted in evidence that the IWA had been considering alternatives for the past three to four months? They also stated that, if funding had been found, they would have brought a proposal to the board. Will Mr. Cunningham confirm to the committee that he told staff that, even if funding

had been available, Cuisle would have been unlikely to reopen because of the issues he has raised here? Will he confirm that I met him on 20 July 2017 and committed to communicating with the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath? When Mr. Cunningham met him on 24 July, did the Minister of State confirm to him that I had made contact and was supportive of the project in Donamon? Given that our guests have made great play of the fact that the IWA met two then Cabinet attendees - the Minister of State and me - do they not believe that, when the HSE eventually reverted to the IWA to say that it would not be forthcoming with funding, it would have been worth their while to contact us again? Will Ms Keogh confirm that, within 24 hours of the staff being informed, I made contact with her requesting an urgent meeting to explore the options available to us and the local community to keep the facility open? Will she confirm that I subsequently contacted her on two further occasions in respect of that matter? I have yet to receive a response to those requests. In light of that, will our guests reconsider the evidence they have given to the committee regarding their willingness to postpone the decision if funding is made available? The Minister of State has confirmed to me that he has also made this request twice. That commitment has not been forthcoming.

Will our guests explain the speed with which the IWA has moved to complete a procurement process for 1,700 bed nights? It went through the process within 20 days of informing the staff. It seems that the board of the IWA has already made its decision.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The Deputy has asked at least five questions. I will do my best to address all of them. If we leave anything out, please revert to me.

The staff at Cuisle have done a fantastic job and have been fabulous ambassadors for the IWA for the past 22 years. It has been extremely difficult for the IWA to reach a position where we are making people redundant. It is not something that we do lightly or without great thought. Regarding the level of notice given to the staff, we have operated within the legislation. Since the centre would have been due to close at the end of the first week in December anyway - it normally closes between then and some time in February - we did not believe that it would be fair to tell people on 1 November that they would be losing their jobs next February and then leave them sitting in limbo until then. To reference some of Senator Dolan's points, it is never easy to make anyone redundant. I have been on the receiving end of redundancy twice - it is devastating. We accept that. If there is an easier or better way to do it, we will reflect on it for the future.

I will ask Mr. Cunningham to provide clarification on the Deputy's meetings with him. The Deputy contacted me within 24 hours of the notice of Cuisle's closure. I asked Mr. Cunningham, as national director of services for Cuisle and a number of other IWA services, to contact the Deputy on my behalf and give him the background to and reasons for the closure, which I understand he did. The Deputy sent two further emails to me requesting that certain actions be taken, including keeping the centre open for a further 12 months while solutions could be found. As CEO, that is not within my remit or my gift to do, but I will relate those comments to the board.

Regarding our willingness to postpone the decision, it is not my decision to make. As CEO of the IWA, my colleagues in management and I work at the behest of the board. It is my job to execute the decisions of the board, and that is what I am doing. If anyone brings a proposal back to me, I will bring it to the board. I have not received any such proposal at this point.

Deputy Denis Naughten: No, Ms Keogh has received a request from me to which she still has not responded.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I apologise for that.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I am just making sure that is clarified. I would not like the impression to go out from this meeting-----

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I would just like to go on the record to say that we have had-----

Deputy Denis Naughten: Other colleagues have also been in contact.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We have been inundated. I apologise if we have not been able to get back to everyone.

We have discussed the procurement process. We began it a number of months ago as a contingency to ensure that, if we got to the point of having to close Cuisle, which we only reached on 18 October, we would be able to provide a service to our members from spring of next year and they would not be left without a holiday in 2020. That is why the process was started a couple of months ago. We had a backup plan. The last thing we wanted to be doing was announcing that we had to close Cuisle when there was no alternative service in place.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Was the Deputy's first question to me on what I said to staff?

Deputy Denis Naughten: No. That has been addressed. It related to the postponement.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: In the context of my contact with the Deputy, I confirm that he was very supportive of the project and that he committed to speaking to the Minister of State. To be honest, I cannot remember what the Minister of State said to me about the Deputy's contact, but I know the latter was supportive and committed to contacting him. That is as far as I can go on that point.

Deputy Denis Naughten: May I ask three brief questions? Has the IWA agreed to leave the building and surrender the contents therein on 29 November? What will happen to the funding that has been raised locally by the community? On the off chance that the landlord decides to continue the service after 29 November, will the IWA support that, given the feedback it has received from its members to the effect that they are delighted to continue visiting Cuisle?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Was the Deputy's first question on whether we had agreed-----

Deputy Denis Naughten: Has the IWA agreed to leave the building and surrender the contents therein on 29 November?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We are in negotiation with the landlord about that. We will still be the leaseholder beyond 29 November. We are in discussions with the landlord about the future of the lease and what that will look like. I have no further information on that matter.

Deputy Denis Naughten: What is the future of the equipment?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: There is a great deal of equipment in the building. To clarify, the service will cease and certain staff will finish on 29 November, but there will be a wind-down period for the rest of us. It is not a matter of just walking away from the building or the service, even from a records point of view, given that the service will continue in the new year. There is work to be done on that front.

We have indicated to the landlords that we need to talk to them about the lease and consider what they propose to do with the building afterwards. We are leaving the building because of

the works required. Once we leave the lease, the question of what to do with the building will be the responsibility of the landlords or whoever takes it on. Given the background, I do not know what will happen, but the assets will be considered in that context.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The IWA would be willing to consider handing over the facility if someone were to continue providing the existing respite service.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: We will enter into negotiations with anyone. We will require some equipment in order to continue the service we provide to people. Cuisle is a national holiday centre and is unlike the Kilkenny service, which is for the Kilkenny area. We continue to provide the services, as we have outlined in detail. Some of the equipment will be required for that purpose, while fixed assets in the building also account for some of it. We have to decide what happens to those assets. We may leave them in the building as part of the negotiation or the owner may not want them in the building. All doors are open in terms of negotiation.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: To answer the question on how much income from fundraising activities was generated locally, at this point all income fundraised locally for Cuisle has been spent in Cuisle. We included in our documents detail of the deficits we have at the centre.

Deputy Denis Naughten: No. In fairness, in her earlier evidence, Ms Keogh stated that €25,000 had been generated locally as the local contribution alongside the LEADER funding. The IWA has not drawn down the LEADER funding.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We have not drawn that down.

Deputy Denis Naughten: It has not drawn down the municipal district funding.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: No.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I presume that it has not spent the income fundraised locally.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Absolutely not.

Deputy Denis Naughten: If another project is willing to operate the centre, will the funding generated for that purpose be made available for that purpose?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We certainly would not draw down that funding. If we were to leave Cuisle, we would not be allowed to draw it down.

Deputy Denis Naughten: No, I am talking about the income from fundraising.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Sorry, I misunderstood.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: There are no easy answers to some of these issues. The funding is available and has not been spent. We have much to consider in terms of moving forward. I spoke to some of the staff involved in the fundraising activities and sought their opinions. The funding is not made up of a lump sum and various amounts.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Yes.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Some people raised funds alone, while others raised money collectively. We have to make decisions around that.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The funds were raised for Cuisle.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: They were fundraised for the Irish Wheelchair Association.

Deputy Denis Naughten: No.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: The money was fundraised for the IWA. As an organisation operating throughout the country, funds raised locally for the IWA stay local.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Yes. The funding was raised on the premise that it would provide matching funding for the LEADER grant and the local authority grant to carry out works at the Cuisle centre in Donamon. That was the purpose and, if needs be, we can have the people who did the fundraising give evidence to the committee to verify that.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: There is no need to bring anyone before the committee. The money is there, we have a record of it and there is transparency. As I said, we have had some conversations with staff. The money is not running off to Dublin or anywhere else. We have to examine this as part of the wind-down.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: To echo Mr. Cunningham's comments, if there was a negotiation with another provider that was willing to take over the centre, we would certainly look at that as part of that negotiation.

Chairman: Deputy O'Connell is a full member of this committee and is involved with other committees. Now that she has returned, I will call her first.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: As a full member of this committee, I do not view this matter through a local lens. I am uneasy about a few of the things I have heard today. Mr. Cunningham referred to a sales and marketing visit to the UK undertaken to look at sustainable jobs for the redeployment of staff. What was the cost of these jollies to see what the IWA would do with staff? I do not find it funny because people are affected.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I do not find it funny either. I find the Deputy's question quite insulting.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: How much did the IWA spend on the trip?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: The trip to the United Kingdom was a return trip for two people.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: How much did it cost?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: The cost was the price of two return flights with Ryanair on the same day.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The flights cost less than €100 each.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: We heard earlier that only one of the 42 staff was interested in redeployment.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Yes.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: Did the IWA ask how many people were interested in redeployment before the trip? It seems strange to make a trip on the basis that one person might be interested in redeployment.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: No. The Deputy either missed something or I did not communi-

cate it. The visit to Revitalise Respite Holidays in the UK is historical. When we were developing Cuisle and the marketing for it - the website and so on - the plan at the time was to grow Cuisle into a bigger and better place. A previous speaker noted that the Cuisle model is unique in Ireland. We discovered that an organisation called Revitalise Respite Holidays in the United Kingdom provides a venue like a hotel for holidays for people with disabilities. The Cuisle manager and our commercial director flew to the UK to meet the management at Revitalise and see the facilities and returned on the same day. The brochures were very glossy and the manager and commercial director visited to see what they could learn in one day, with a view to seeing what they could add to the development of Cuisle. The trip had nothing to do with the redeployment of staff.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: Mr. Cunningham mentioned the trip earlier.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Yes.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The redeployment is a completely separate issue.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: Cuisle staff flew to the UK and it was stated that this was specifically to do with the redeployment of staff. Cuisle checked where the staff who are to be made redundant wanted to go and only one person indicated a desire to be redeployed.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: That is correct.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: The trip was mentioned in the same conversation so I assumed that the two were connected. The trip was on a wider issue. Is that correct?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Yes, it was taken at the time we were developing Cuisle to see what other organisations were doing.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: Has Cuisle applied what it learned from the trip? One person is interested in redeployment. Was the trip worthwhile?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The trip to the UK took place in 2018. I would like to detach it from the redeployment issue if I may because they are completely separate timelines and issues. In 2018, when the board of the Irish Wheelchair Association made the decision that we would invest in the further development of Cuisle, invest in sales and marketing for Cuisle and stay in the facility, further to being able to find the funding for the capital works, as part of our own investment in developing Cuisle, we spent €200 travelling to the UK to learn from another provider that is an expert in this field. We employed a sales and marketing resource who spent time with the staff in Cuisle, trained them in sales and marketing, approached other organisations and sought further bookings. As members will see, there was a small increase in our bookings in 2018 and 2019 as a result of that. There was also a small increase in Cuisle's income, independent of State funding, as a consequence.

In November 2019, when we were in the unfortunate position of having to announce redundancies, we wrote to all staff in Cuisle and asked them to return an expression of interest as to whether their preference was to be made redundant or take up an offer of redeployment. To date, only one member of staff has taken up the offer of redeployment. That person will be redeployed either in the new holiday model or within our personal assistance service. That has been negotiated with the individual in question.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: How much will it cost to make 25 staff redundant? I know the

witnesses indicated that the position remains fluid but is there a ballpark figure?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: It is difficult at this point to put a figure on the cost because we have not had responses from all members of staff.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: What about the 25 staff?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I cannot give the Deputy a specific figure for the 25 staff because I do not have a list of the names in front of me.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: Will redundancy cost €1 million?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: No, it is certainly not €1 million.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: Is it €500,000?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: It might be €500,000 but it is certainly significantly less than the cost of the capital works.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: How long is the lease for the Cuisle building?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The lease has been in place since 1997 and expires in 2026. It is, I believe, a 27-year lease.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: Is there a penalty for exiting the lease six years early? Has that penalty been worked out yet?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: No penalty was built into the lease because we paid the rent upfront. I am not sure if the Deputy was in the room when we discussed this.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: I must have missed that part of the meeting but I would like to hear the details again.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The lease was paid upfront at the beginning of the term of the lease. The full rent was paid at the start of the lease.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: For 20 years?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Twenty-five years.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Yes.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: The IWA paid in advance.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Yes.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: Will it be at a loss for the remaining six years?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The lease was €125,000 for 25 years. It is a very small annual rental cost of €5,000 a year.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: It is still money. In terms of the LEADER grant, I assume that when the IWA leased the building in 1997 the electrics, plumbing and everything else were fine because it would not have leased the building otherwise. Is there anything in the lease stipulating that responsibility rests with the owner of the building?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: It is written in the terms of the lease and may be quoted in the documents we submitted that it is our responsibility, as a tenant, to be responsible for all works required under legislation. This includes electrical and fire safety upgrades, etc. The landlord has no responsibility in that regard.

Deputy Kate O’Connell: From what I have heard today, it started as a funding issue, the IWA cannot afford to keep the place going, the Department is not giving the money and the hotel model is the alternative. With Ms Keogh’s experience, and she sits as the chair, does she think the option here is better? Clearly, the users of the service do not think this is a better option. Does Ms Keogh personally think it is better, given her experience, or is it just all that is open to the IWA now, when there is no funding? With her experience, what would she think is the optimum outcome for people using the service?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I want to make a small correction, if I may. I am the CEO, not the chair, so I wanted to get that straight lest anybody fear I had been promoted.

Deputy Kate O’Connell: Excuse me.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: With regard to the model itself-----

Deputy Kate O’Connell: “Yes” or “No” will do.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: In an ideal world, we would like to do both. We would like to be able to provide everything that all of our members want at all times. It is not for me to say “either-or” as I do not use the services. We would like to be able to provide all of our members with all the services they want, be that the Cuisle model or the hotel model. We have significant demand for both. In an ideal world, we would do both.

Deputy Kate O’Connell: If the IWA was to choose one-----

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I cannot choose one.

Deputy Kate O’Connell: I have worked with many people with disabilities over the years, for example, a pharmacist and a family member with disabilities. I do not want to class everybody as the same but there is a familiarity with buildings. For example, we bring my sister-in-law to the same place every year on holidays because it is familiar to her, she knows the people and she would go berserk if we brought her somewhere else. That is fundamental when we are planning our year. It is important that there is familiarity and that people have their equipment and know where it is going to fit. Knowing the bathroom is going to accommodate their chair, the bath fits and they have whatever else they need, and that their family members or whoever else goes with them are familiar with where fire exits are and all of that, is almost unquantifiable in terms of benefit to people.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I agree.

Deputy Kate O’Connell: As CEO, does Ms Keogh not think it would be better if the IWA had the money to keep Cuisle?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We have stated repeatedly today that if we had been able to secure the funding, we would have stayed in Cuisle. The only reason we were leaving at this point in time is that the funding has not been made available to us.

I take the Deputy’s point about familiarity. I would also like to underpin individuality. A

hotel is not for everybody and, equally, Cuisle is not for everybody. I go back to my earlier statement that we would like to be able to provide both.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: Ms Keogh said a hotel is not for everybody.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Yes, a hotel is not for everybody.

Deputy Kate O'Connell: If a hotel is not for everybody, and if Cuisle closes, there will be people who will not have a place that is suitable for them to go on holidays.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: To add to that, the Irish Wheelchair Association also operates a holiday respite service in Dublin which is fully accessible for anybody-----

Deputy Kate O'Connell: There is the same argument of familiarity.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I agree with the Deputy. I bring her back to the point that the only reason the decision has been made to close Cuisle is that the building is no longer safe to operate in and we have not been able to find the funding.

Senator Terry Leyden: I thank the Chairman and his committee for arranging this meeting today. I failed to contact the CEO. She refused to take calls from me, which is strange. It has not happened in my many years in public life that someone in such a position would not communicate with elected representatives, but Ms Keogh is here today.

I welcome Councillors Orla Leyden and Anthony Waldron and all the staff, members and friends of Cuisle. They have made great efforts and a lot of work has gone into the area around Donamon and Castlecoote, and the whole county. It is a national issue, not just local. I thank the Divine Word Missionaries for their commitment to this project since 1997, to Seamus Thompson, who was chief executive at the time, and the dedicated staff who have committed themselves for so long and so well, and who are being treated in the most abhorrent manner by Ms Keogh, her staff and the board of the Irish Wheelchair Association. I have never in my political life come across anything like the way they have been treated. I want to put that on record. It is a very significant point.

Ms Keogh came here today with her mind made up. She did not come here for dialogue. She had her opening statement prepared and she submitted what she had decided to do before she came here today. She was not interested in listening to the proposals and suggestions of the members of this committee, Oireachtas Members, councillors, supporters and friends of Cuisle.

I have many questions and I will use every minute I have. I put the first question to Ms Keogh. In light of the very strong case made by my colleagues, will she put to her board that, in justice, the IWA should postpone this decision for six to nine months to see what we can do? We were not informed there was a problem. I was not contacted. As the longest serving Oireachtas Member in the county and the area, and as a neighbour of Cuisle, given our lands adjoin, I was not contacted. However, I was involved when Charlie McCreevy and Brian Cowen provided up to €1 million, although I do not know the exact amount. I was involved with my colleagues and councillors in regard to the provision of specially designed fishing stands, the development of the roof and the development of the buildings. I know that building back to front because I live beside it. To avoid me having to put more questions that may have been answered, I am asking Ms Keogh to now give a commitment that she will go back to her board and say that, arising from the dialogue today at this important committee, she will postpone the decision to close for six or 12 months to give us time. Will she please put this to the board aris-

ing from the discussions today?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I would like to make reference to Senator Leyden's contact to the IWA office on 5 November. I was not in the office on 5 November when he called. The call was taken by a member of the IWA staff who is a wheelchair user. She expressed to me afterwards that she felt very intimidated and frightened by the Senator's tone with her on the phone that day.

Senator Terry Leyden: That is outrageous. I made it quite clear that the message was to Ms Keogh, not her. Let us be quite clear. This is a trick you are using to damage my reputation.

Chairman: Sorry, Senator-----

Senator Terry Leyden: That is totally unfair. In all my 40 years of public office, and I served in three Departments, no staff member would ever say I treated them in an unfair way. I never lost a staff member in all my years. I want that withdrawn.

Chairman: Ms Keogh's interpretation cannot really be put on the record of this committee.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: That is fair enough. What I will say is that the only message that was relayed to me was that the Senator was demanding to speak to me and he was calling for my resignation. I find that personally quite intimidating. I find somebody sitting opposite me, raising their voice to me and pointing at me quite intimidating as well. I came here today voluntarily to answer questions. I did not come here to be intimidated and I feel intimidated.

Senator Terry Leyden: You were trying to intimidate me.

Chairman: Please, Senator.

Senator Terry Leyden: You are trying to intimidate me by your allegations. I want that statement withdrawn.

Chairman: The Senator is out of order. We have invited the CEO of the IWA here to give evidence. We are not going to accept intimidation of her so you are out of order.

Senator Terry Leyden: Or of me.

Chairman: You have five minutes left.

Senator Terry Leyden: Or me. I am asking the question. Will Ms Keogh postpone the decision?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I will answer the Senator's question. It is not up to me to postpone the decision, which is not within my remit. If I receive a formal proposal from any Member of the Oireachtas, I will bring that back to my board. With regard to the Senator's suggestion that we continue to keep Cuisle open for six to nine months, I will reiterate what we have said several times today, namely, the board of the IWA has a legal obligation with regard to the health and safety of anybody who operates or visits any of our premises. The board of the IWA is not prepared to take the risk of someone being injured or worse due to fire or electrical problems in the coming six or nine months. If Senator Leyden has a proposal to bring back, I will be more than happy to present it to my board, but it would have to be a clear and specific proposal.

Senator Terry Leyden: I wish to make a proposal from this meeting with my Oireachtas colleagues. I propose that Ms Keogh brings back to her board a proposal from me to postpone

the decision for a period to allow us to negotiate with the Government and not close the facility in that regard.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I repeat that I am not the chairman. I am the chief executive.

Senator Terry Leyden: Ms Keogh commented on a proposal sent from me. I would send it in writing.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: If Senator Leyden sends it to me in writing and it is a clear proposal outlining what we do for the coming six to nine months - the building cannot open until the works are completed - then I would be happy to bring it to my board.

Senator Terry Leyden: I am making the proposal through the committee that the decision be postponed. I want support from my colleagues. I presume it will be forthcoming.

(Interruptions).

Senator Terry Leyden: That is fair enough. Now, there is no immediate danger in this building.

Chairman: Sorry, Senator.

Senator Terry Leyden: I am asking the question.

Chairman: The Senator has made a proposal but the committee cannot commit to his proposal.

Senator Terry Leyden: I cannot put it because I am not a member.

Chairman: That is correct. We are going to have a summary at the end. Please continue with your point.

Senator Terry Leyden: From my knowledge of the building - I was there recently - there is no immediate danger or health and safety issue in that building. Has the fire officer in Roscommon condemned the building? Has he actually made a statement? Has he been there?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: The fire officer is familiar with it. I think the fair context of this is that under the law we are required to have periodic inspection and testing of the electrical installations in the building. That was requested by the fire officer at the time of the bar licence renewal. That report was completed. We carried out the remedial works that we could carry out at that point. I know it is difficult to bridge the gap in between.

We are lucky in the sense that during the past 22 years there have been no incidents. We have a good record in fire safety management. All of that has been reviewed and is excellent. However, we cannot guarantee it. The electrical system has gone way beyond its lifespan. We all have a lifespan, as do houses and electrical systems. We cannot unknow what we know. The report recommends that all this work should be done. In that context it is a legal responsibility of the board. The board has made the decision to cease operating the service on 29 November. It is not the case that we can say the building is dangerous. The risks are present. That is the reality. Life is full of risks. The reality is there would be a problem if something happened - I am with everyone on this. However, I am sure many of us sitting around the table and many involved in the campaign would not be seen for dust if there was an accident or incident relating

to fire safety or electrics in Cuisle on foot of the report issued. I do not carry the responsibility. The board carries the legal responsibility for that. The board has made its decision on that basis. We have said from the outset that any proposal coming back would have to be a concrete proposal about completing the works and not involve waiting a further six months or a year.

Senator Terry Leyden: Will the IWA hold an emergency general meeting to consider the situation arising from the proposal to close Cuisle? That would allow for proper democratic consultation with the members of the association, something that has not occurred.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The Irish Wheelchair Association will hold an emergency general meeting if the required number of members of the Irish Wheelchair Association request that we do so.

Senator Terry Leyden: How many?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I actually do not know that. We are taking legal advice on that at the moment. The law around companies limited by guarantee is changing, so I cannot give the Senator a figure. However, I can absolutely guarantee him that if we receive a request for an emergency general meeting and that request is in order, then we will absolutely hold an EGM.

Senator Terry Leyden: If the EGM decides to hold Cuisle open, will the IWA have to accept that decision?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: That would be a matter for the board.

Senator Terry Leyden: Finally, I wish to make something quite clear. Under no circumstances, after 40 years in public life, have I ever been accused of intimidating anyone on the telephone or in person. I was three times a Minister. I never lost a staff member in those three Ministries. No complaint was ever made and I never sacked anyone in my Ministries. I find it quite abhorrent. My daughter is here today and I am sure she is shocked by the statement. I was anxious to speak to Ms Keogh. Ms Keogh refused to speak to me. There were about three calls. In the circumstances I would have no problem. I know Ms Keogh is on the control of the charity's board, which is rather unusual, to say the least. Ms Keogh is controlling the charity. She is on the board. If I make an allegation against her board now, she will arbitrate on that as a member of that charity.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: That is unfair.

Chairman: Senator, please. You are out of order.

Senator Terry Leyden: I am in order now.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I did not hear a question so I have no response.

Senator Terry Leyden: The question was that I will not accept what Ms Keogh has said. If I offended anyone I would withdraw that offence.

Chairman: Deputy Smith is next.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I thank the IWA representatives for the presentation. I want to talk about the promotion leaflet for hotel breaks. The leaflet has quotes that read like comments on Trivago or Booking.com. There are references to the staff and food being excellent and to patrons feeling equal going on holidays with everyone else. They no longer feel that people with

disabilities are put in a box. They say the service is excellent and gives them a great holiday and not only respite. Those quotes were also in the IWA presentation, as Ms Keogh will be aware. The reason I have read them out is because I believe there is a major imbalance in the representation of what people with disabilities may or may not choose and what may or may not be open to them.

Like everyone else, and I assume it is the same for the IWA representatives, we have been heavily lobbied by those who use the centre regularly for their holidays. Some of the quotes would break hearts. I want to read some of them into the record because it is only fair to have people praise Cuisle in the same way as the brochure praises the hotels. One comes from the sister of a 37 year old woman. She said her sister is vulnerable and cannot talk or walk, but she calls Cuisle her boozing holiday because she can drive herself to the bar, where the staff know her and know what she likes. One man goes to visit her every year she is there and has even written a song about her. How special is that? Another comment comes from a woman directly. Cuisle offers her and her friends from her centre a holiday together where they look forward to seeing each other very much. It is the only opportunity they have for a holiday together. They have a great time meeting other wheelchair users. The next comment is from the father of a young teenage girl. He is actually a friend of mine. He says his daughter will not stay in anyone's house except his mother's because the girl knows her granny will look after her in the same way that the staff in Cuisle look after her. The idea of throwing her into a new surrounding because of some notion of integration is nonsense. She needs to feel safe and secure and that only happens when she has continuity. If we force people into more isolation when they do not want to go somewhere else, they will feel more anxiety. That will deter their families from sending them on holidays. When people suffer from mental and physical disabilities, it is all about safety, security and knowing what to expect.

I have read their testimony because I believe it is important to put balance on this. It strikes me as strange that when the IWA is asked for the numbers on what users say, the number of people who want to use Cuisle and the numbers who do not, the association does not have exact numbers. It has a general pattern of what may be happening with service users.

In *thejournal.ie* and the association statement today, the IWA "stressed to Minister McGrath that the clear choice and preference of people with a disability is increasingly more about having access to positive and non-segregated settings and where existing commercial hotel provider settings implement universal design initiatives to accommodate people of all levels of abilities". That is a big statement to make without a questionnaire or survey that we can all look at and determine, for example, that 99 users prefer to be in Cuisle while 299 would prefer to go to commercial hotels. That is a big statement to make. If the IWA made that clear to the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, and that is what the IWA believes to be the pattern based on what we know about the actual results, then the IWA representations to the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, expressed a preference for the hotel model over the Cuisle model. It may well be the case that had the IWA done it the other way around, the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, might have decided to find the €1.5 million. I am not a big fan of any Minister but, as it happens, the Minister of State may well have done that.

I agree with the IWA in one respect and I see where the association has a problem. This is a bigger political issue. This is the same week in which the Government announced it will put €3 billion of taxpayers' money into broadband. There has just been a big announcement on the overspend on the children's hospital, which although we cannot prove it, most of us believe impacts on all services, including mental health and disability.

In her submission, Ms Keogh stated, “In June, this committee was briefed by a number of disability service provider umbrella groups on the growing funding crisis in the disability sector.” That is an important statement. She went on to state, “In this context, during the period 2008 to 2018, the IWA has seen its financial reserves diminish by €5.7 million”. In 2008, there was a banking collapse, the then Government bailed out the banks to the tune of €64 billion, and many services suffered. We now live in the fastest, healthiest-growing economy in the EU. In the context that this is happening to the most vulnerable sectors of society, the IWA stated its funding is depleted and that there is a crisis in the funding of the disability sector. It is an absolute disgrace that Cuisle will close. Anybody who was at the protests last week would fully back the users to retain the service. We have to find a way to retain it. Given that the Government makes a bags of everything else, overspends on everything and deprives people of proper funding, we will have to find a firefighting service way out of the matter. We cannot let down the father of the girl, the sister of the woman, all the people attending the meeting and their families.

Whatever proposals the Senator made may be the way out but the IWA should tell the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, that the emphasis put on the hotel model was outweighed by the protest and the sentiment coming strongly from the people use Cuisle day to day and year to year, and that we cannot afford to close it. People have to have the choice and preference, and the IWA should state that, unfortunately, it gave the Minister of State the wrong impression there is only one way to go, namely, into commercialised hotels. What IWA stated to the Minister of State was flawed, or if it was not, we need to hear what the wheelchair users and the people who use the service say to the IWA about the service. Our guests might comment on that.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I return to the fact that the decision for Cuisle was made because the Government was not able to provide funding for it.

Deputy Bríd Smith: That does not seem to be what the IWA asked of the Government.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Two years ago, when we had our first engagement with the Minister of State and the HSE, our request at that point was to secure funding in order that Cuisle could remain the fantastic, wonderful facility it is, as the Deputy expressed well and as the comments of the people who go there show. We value the centre. All our dialogue for two years was about securing the funding. I met the Minister of State last week, after it had become clear through the HSE that the funding would not be available. He invited us in to talk to him about how the new holiday model will work. It was a different period and a different conversation. For two years, our initial conversations were focused entirely on securing the funding.

Deputy Bríd Smith: For two years, the IWA had one type of dialogue, namely, about how it needed money to save Cuisle. In the past month, there was a different type of dialogue, namely, that the hotel model will work, that it will be integrated and that it will help people to develop. There is no evidence that people should be taken from a setting they are used to, where they can meet their friends and where the staff know them, what they drink and what they are saying when nobody else can understand them, or that what the IWA put to the Minister of State holds water. The committee needs to seek a meeting with him to help to have the decision reversed. We have political weight on our side. The Government cannot, in one week, give €3 billion to the national broadband plan and say there is not €1.15 million to fund the centre. It is an outrageous indictment by any measure of a decent society.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I do not disagree with anything the Deputy stated. I am one of the

people who lobbied the committee in June in respect of the crisis in disability funding. It is something that the IWA does day in, day out. We did not want to leave Cuisle. We have invested a great deal of the IWA's money in recent years to ensure we can stay there, but without the works being done, we will not be able to do so. It is a very sad day for everybody who goes to Cuisle, the staff at Cuisle and all the IWA's management and board. In the absence of having the works done, we cannot continue to use the building.

Deputy Bríd Smith: In light of the IWA's report and what it has been quoted in the media as stating, it has not fought hard enough for the users. Ms Keogh stated she only services the board but she is the CEO. Her remuneration reflects her responsibilities, which are not just to the board but to the users, and she has not fought hard enough for them. I do not mean she has sat on her hands for the past two years but the IWA's statements in recent weeks have let down the users. We need to reverse quickly and tell the Minister of State that the service cannot close. The Government will have to find the money. Money is there. Some €17 million was spent on protecting Donald Trump when he visited. Money is available and we have to ensure we fight for it.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I spend a significant amount of time lobbying the Government on behalf people with disabilities. We have done a great deal of work on the matter over the past two years. If that was not enough, I am sorry, but we felt we did everything we could in that period. On the Deputy's comment about what was reported in the media in recent weeks, the IWA has had a small number of media inquiries in respect of the Cuisle decision. The volume of misinformation put into public dialogue by the media raises questions about the media and how it conducts itself because it has not dealt with or contacted the IWA directly.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I referred only to *thejournal.ie*. The quotation to which I referred was included in the IWA's submission.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I accept that. I am not having a go at the Deputy.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I am not referring to anything broader than that quotation. I used it as evidence to suggest that the IWA conceded far too much to the Minister of State and that it did so on behalf of its users, which was the wrong action to take.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome those in attendance from County Roscommon. I will get to the nuts and bolts of the matter rather than rehashing questions already asked. My understanding is that the hotel model is in its infancy, that it will be a ten-year model, and that the idea is to put the two models in parallel. A six-year extension was sought with the Divine Word missionaries and they were willing to accept it.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: That is correct.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: If the IWA were to finish at the end of the month, under the current lease, it would be obliged to pay for seven years of heating, at €40,000 per year. For general upkeep, therefore, it would probably cost approximately €300,000. Is that fair to say?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: It would depend on what happens. We would have to negotiate with the landlords.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The IWA would be obliged to hold the lease.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: No, not necessarily.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The lease is until 2026. Is that correct?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Yes.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: If the landlord said that given the contract will run until 2026, the IWA would have to keep the building upgrading-----

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I do not envisage that but the Deputy is correct that the lease will run until 2026. We do not have any rent to pay on it.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: In fairness, nobody is against hotel models. People need to have the choice. If the IWA sought to extend the lease, say, by six years to 2032, would there be a commitment to keep Cuisle going until then if the money was found?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: There are a few questions and I will have to untangle them. If the lease were extended-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The questions were not meant to be loaded.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I acknowledge that but it has been a long afternoon.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I will respond to the Deputy. To set the context, as Deputy Fitzmaurice will know, I have been involved in Cuisle for 12 years. I am based in Mayo and live an hour's journey from it. I know the service fairly well and have worked with Jean, the manager, to develop it.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Would Mr. Cunningham be in favour of keeping it open?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: There were no plans whatsoever to leave Cuisle. I would answer that question this way-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Does Mr. Cunningham consider the facility could operate for the foreseeable future, for the next ten to 12 years, if everything was ideal?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: That is the road we were going down

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: That is all I want to know. Having spoken to Mr. Cunningham in recent weeks, I understand the boiler house is the only place where there was a concern about asbestos. Is that right?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: No. There was broken asbestos in the boiler room and that is why we had-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Yes, but that was the only place-----

Mr. Tony Cunningham: No. It was not. The report indicates asbestos was found in various places, including in the kitchens and on roof tiles. It was found in a number of places but the main one was the unknown factor in terms of the heating system.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What is the expiry date of the fire certificate for the facility or when is it due to be reviewed?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I could not answer that question.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I presume it is next year some time. Is it?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I do not know.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It would be a good basis if a valid fire certificate is in place. If the IWA does not have the money to do what is required, it has prepared drawings and specifications of the work to be done, be it by the Divine Word missionaries, the State or whoever. I presume that was paid for out of taxpayers' money. If there was the political will to facilitate this and if the Divine Word missionaries were to work with the IWA and the State, would there be an opportunity to see the drawings or specifications of what is required to be done?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I have met both the rector and provincial of the Divine Word missionaries, the latter of whom I met in Dublin last week.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Do they have a copy of that information?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: No. They do not have a copy of it. We gave them sight of all of it and went through it with them, including the drawings and the quantity surveyor's cost estimate, because there were questions as to whether they even existed or whether we had plans to close the place. My understanding on leaving the meeting was that the provincial was very satisfied and recognised the volume of work and expenditure that went into bringing it to that point. We also spoke about the lease, to which the Deputy referred, and I said that after the IWA's time, those plans would be of no use to us *per se* and that we would be happy to talk to them about the use of the work that has been done date so that it would not go to waste. The reason we did not give them a copy of it, as we would have communicated previously, is that people are still talking about money coming forward under the EU procurement directives, in respect of which we must be careful. In fact, our quantity surveyor was not happy we were even saying the estimate for what was involved was €1.15 million as of last year. We would compromise everybody if we openly provided the plans. They have been drawn up and have been witnessed by the landlord, who will confirm that to the Deputy. We are more than happy to talk to the landlord about this as the plans will be of no use to us if we are not in the Cuisle facility.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The staff who work in the facility, and a niece of mine works there, are ferociously committed. It is not just a matter of the work but they have a belief in what they are doing. If this committee asked Ms Keogh two questions or voted to postpone the laying off of staff for a six-month period - that would not make or break anyone, and I understand the IWA must comply with fire regulations, which no one disputes, and if the facility has a fire certificate it is in a fairly good place - would she bring a proposal to the IWA board that the facility would not close for a six-month period during which the public representatives, the State or the Minister for Health's office and the IWA would work together on this? Nobody is saying they have a magic wand. The IWA has said this facility is a good model. If a solution can be found, is there any sense in dropping the hammer, so to speak, on the facility at the end of the month? I ask that six months be provided to facilitate this and let us see if a successful outcome can be achieved. Would Ms Keogh be willing to bring that proposal to the IWA board to try to achieve a successful outcome?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: As I stated, and I might refer to the Deputy as Michael as we have met previously, if we receive a proposal from the committee, we will bring it back to our board, be it with regard to the jobs or to the building. I would again add a word of caution with regard to the building and the board's legal obligations around that.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Who would make such a proposal?

Chairman: I will allow members another round of questions but I will summarise what has happened this afternoon. First, I thank the witnesses very much for coming in to give their evidence and explain the position regarding Cuisle. They will have picked up the passion of the committee for this facility and of its members closely associated with the area where it is located. The issue is now in the political arena. There is consensus among the members who have attended this committee that they want this facility to continue to operate in whatever way that can possibly be done.

It would seem to be a unique service not only in Ireland but in other jurisdictions. It would be a shame to lose it without us, as politicians, giving the witnesses every assistance to try to keep it open. I understand they have gone down the channels they have gone down and have not been successful. However, having aired the issues this afternoon, I propose, as Deputy Fitzmaurice suggested, this committee would write to the Minister asking for a review of how Cuisle is being funded, how funds are being made available to it, and ask if the witnesses could defer their decision to close the facility for a number of months to allow the political process that has started here today to feed through to see if funding can be found, or if there is a philanthropist who has not been identified yet, or whatever way funding could be provided. I ask if they could defer the proposed closure for a period of time to allow the political process to put its weight behind what everyone here wants to happen.

Deputy Denis Naughten: With all due respect, the view of the members is that the committee should write to the board of the IWA requesting that it would postpone this decision to allow us to put that opportunity in place. I have already put this in writing to chief executive officer but she has not responded to it. The Minister has confirmed to me on two occasions that he has put that request to the CEO. The responsibility is that the committee would ask that this would be formally presented to the board. That is the wish of the members here, of the community and of the people with disabilities who use the facility.

Chairman: That is a very acceptable proposition.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: As Senator Leyden said, if that proposal is made, I will second it and I believe every Oireachtas Members will support it.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Yes.

Chairman: We will do that but we will also write to the Minister-----

Deputy Denis Naughten: Absolutely, yes.

Chairman: -----send him a transcript of what has transpired here this afternoon and encourage him to review the situation from his point of view.

Senator Maura Hopkins: In terms of the proposal.

Chairman: We have been here for the best part of two hours and 40 minutes. I know members are anxious to ask one additional question. We will have a quick-fire round and then conclude the meeting, if that is agreeable.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Senator Swanick asked me to apologise on his behalf for not being here. A family relation has died and he is attending the funeral. I acknowledge letters received from Erica Boucher and her mother about what Cuisle has meant to them and the heart-break they are suffering over its proposed closure. They are full of compliments for the staff.

The Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, made a statement on Monday, 18 November indicating that the main reason behind the decision to move away from Cuisle is that there has been a significant drop-off in numbers seeking to avail of respite in the facility in recent times and the preference of people has been for hotels, as has been facilitated in Kilkenny. There have been substantial price increases in Cuisle. In 2015, a person with high-dependency needs paid €175 per night for full board and care. In 2019, this increased to €220 in mid-season, representing a 26% increase. It rose to €230 in peak season, representing an increase of 31%. Even during the low season, when there is a lot of unused capacity, the price rose from €175 to €200, a 14% increase.

There has been a major reduction in funding to provide respite breaks. For example, the Dublin and mid-Leinster budget decreased from €150,000 to €60,000 in recent years. There has been a reduction in staffing resources in Cuisle, limiting the number of people who can access the service. Currently, there is one nurse with a 19.5-hour contract and another who can work two weeks out of four and who has a 12-hour contract. Numerous people have allegedly been told by the IWA that they could not visit the centre this year as a result of the staffing issues.

The number on the carers' roster in Cuisle has reduced from 30 in 2017 to 18 at present. Duty manager positions have reduced from three 39-hour positions in 2016 to one 39-hour position and one 20-hour position in 2019.

I have one question. Mr. Cunningham may correct me if I am wrong. He addressed Roscommon County Council last Monday at a meeting hosted by the chairman, Councillor Paschal Fitzmaurice, and he answered many questions.

Chairman: We need to move on.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: This is very important. I will finish shortly. At the meeting, I do not believe Mr. Cunningham ever mentioned the asbestos report. If I am wrong, he should correct me. This is why I feel the whole argument about asbestos and the building not being safe is a new one. It did not exist before now and it is now being brought into the equation. I thank the delegates for being here but I ask them to adhere to what 11 Oireachtas Members, including the Chairman, have said. There should be a suspension of what is proposed if there is any respect for the people affected. There was a former Deputy at the meeting relating to this matter. I ask the delegates to go back to their board and put this on hold for 12 months. There are substantial numbers of people who will raise considerable money in the area to keep the service going. I can prove that on paper within days.

Chairman: Can we move on to the other members?

Senator Maura Hopkins: I am just going through the timeline provided by the delegates in the context of the supplementary information. On 24 July 2017, Mr. Cunningham met the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, at which time I understand the budget of €423,000 was discussed. Contrary to the correspondence I have, Mr. Cunningham says that was not provided. Did he not believe, given his statement that funding was not forthcoming, that it would be worthwhile and important to engage again with the Minister of State before the board of the association would make a decision?

With regard to the meeting with the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, on 12 November, I understand the Minister of State requested to meet representatives of the IWA and that it was not the other way around. Can Mr. Cunningham elaborate on the discussions on the

budget for upgrade works, including in respect of asbestos, electrical equipment and fire safety? Was the budget discussed at the meeting or, as we are led to believe, was the discussion focused on implementing a new model?

It is important that the contributions made here be listened to. We have a sense that we are not being listened to. This has been a huge shock for service users, staff and the community. We are saying clearly that it is important that we provide choice but that there are individuals and families who require enhanced support and who want to avail themselves of the facilities currently available at Cuisle. The delegation should please listen to what we have said and take it back to the board, which should review all that has been discussed here today. We are very concerned and angry over the decision, which has been made without any consultation, contrary to what was presented in the opening statement. I ask the delegates to be honest with us.

Chairman: I will bring in three more members before we have the questions answered. Does Senator Dolan have an additional question to ask?

Senator John Dolan: I have a comment. I do not want to ask any more questions. While sitting here, I have heard that J.P. McManus has roots that go back to Roscommon. That is not a joke.

Deputy Denis Naughten: No.

Senator John Dolan: The Deputy should bow to my knowledge. I have to bow to the knowledge of Deputy Martin Kenny, who informed me of that. If Cuisle were located in Limerick, the matter would be solved.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Support Cuisle.

Senator John Dolan: Let me move on. We now have the transcript. I stated earlier that there was clearly a sense that people were upset and sour. The taste takes a while to get out of one's mouth but many people here have started asking very specific questions about how we should try to dig ourselves out of a hole. I have heard the IWA state that if the funding issue did not exist, it would be carrying on with Cuisle. Therefore, we are in a place where we now have to turn a corner and get into a mode that is more technical and detailed in respect of finding a way. I totally agree with Deputy Denis Naughten and the Chairman on communicating directly with the board of the IWA on the basis of what has been said here and the various questions and requests made, and on communicating directly with the Minister. I wish to make a statement and I do not wish to be difficult in making it: there is a hurdle of some kind in that what is known cannot be unknown. Mr. Cunningham said this. Whether it is a game-stopper in terms of hanging on to the service for a period, I do not know, but it is a live issue. We have a responsibility in terms of providing safe services but I will be very happy to do anything I can and work with people.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I will be in the House talking about another IWA member in a couple of minutes so I will just ask three very specific questions. I do not expect the delegates to have the figures today on the first question but they might come back to me on it. How many IWA members requiring high-level support were provided with respite nights in 2019? How many nights were provided? What is the projection for next year in terms of the high-level support cases?

From the evidence provided today, it seems no Member of the Oireachtas was contacted between 1 July and 1 November this year, yet the IWA was putting alternatives in place in case

funding did not come through.

Mr. Cunningham was asked to choose between the hotel option and the Cuisle model. I have colleagues who were at the meeting with the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, and who have discussed the matter with him since. I understand that the association has made it quite clear that it has made a choice. Its preference is to have the hotel model henceforth rather than the Cuisle model, which it defines as an institution-type residential setting.

Chairman: Could we take those questions and then come back to the other members?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Deputy Eugene Murphy referred to the cost, staffing and nursing in Cuisle. Is that correct?

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I asked specific questions about the way staff numbers have been reduced in recent years. I gave the figures. Mr. Cunningham might not have got them all but he might remember some of them. It is quite clear the way staff have been reduced and then people were told no respite was available. Obviously, if one reduces the number of staff, one will not be able to provide the respite.

The other very important question was about the asbestos report. Mr. Cunningham gave a very comprehensive address to Roscommon County Council and he answered a lot of questions but, from memory, the issue of an asbestos report never came up at that meeting.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I will start with the last question. To be quite honest, I cannot remember. I spent two and a half hours answering questions. I would have to play back the video to hear what I said, but asbestos is a reality for us.

Unlike a lot of other respite services, such as, for example, those in Mayo that are fully funded, we are not a section 39 organisation so we get a contribution from the HSE towards our operating costs. Hence, we try to generate business from catering, for example, in order to generate the income. We also do fundraising locally and nationally to subsidise the service. I will link in to what Ms Keogh said to the committee recently about funding for the service. Funding is an issue. Many of our reserves have gone on sustaining services after sustaining funding cuts over the years.

In terms of our strategy, at this point we have to look at our services on an individual basis to see if they are sustainable. One takes opportunities to make savings when they come along. If the money is not coming in, it cannot go out. I do not know the staffing levels off the top of my head but I know Cuisle has been restricted in its staffing levels, largely due to budgetary constraints.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: What about the price increases?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Yes, I call them fees, but it is the same thing. At one time there was a flat rate for everybody that came to Cuisle, but those who were more independent or had lower support needs were not happy with that. We had a lot of complaints. They felt they were being penalised with the flat rate so we had to analyse the costs and introduce a range of costs. A person who was very independent would have a particular rate for bed and breakfast. Then there were different price ranges for people who required low, medium or high support or medication or clinical tasks. There were price increases because the money was not there. It was a case of increasing the costs for people, which are often funded by groups through fundraising, although I accept individuals have to fund it as well, and they have limited disposable income.

We had to increase the costs or to cut back further on bed nights.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Cunningham. Could he respond to the questions from Senator Hopkins?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: In terms of the ongoing engagements, I will put my hands up and say that as far as we are concerned we could have done things differently in terms of who we contacted and how we contacted them. Once it became very clear that the avenue for us was through the HSE's capital programmes for funding, we worked on that. I provided some dates for the committee. Reference was made to a meeting we had with the Department of Health and the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath. Then we moved on to negotiations with the HSE. We have had ongoing consultations with the HSE estates and follow-up meetings to discuss progress. We had been working with them all along in the hope that we would get funding for the centre.

Senator Maura Hopkins: That does not really answer my question. Did the witnesses not think it worth their while to seek further engagement with the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, if there was a sense that the funding was not forthcoming? Do they believe that was good enough?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We did seek further engagement.

Senator Maura Hopkins: Is there correspondence to say that the IWA sought a further meeting with the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I am not sure if there is correspondence or if it went through the HSE but we did attempt to escalate it. Could I answer the second question?

Senator Maura Hopkins: We do not have accountability.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: With the greatest respect, we have been here for three hours without as much as a bathroom break and I would just like to get through this if that is okay, Chairman.

Chairman: If Ms Keogh wishes to take a break, she should signal that.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: No, it is okay, I would rather finish if that is okay.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: We should take a break.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I think we should adjourn. This is too important.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: We should have a ten-minute break.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I will finish answering Senator Hopkins's question first if that is okay. With regard to the meeting that took place with the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, on 12 November. I attended that meeting along with representatives from the HSE. The issue of asbestos was raised and there was a discussion between the HSE representatives and the Minister of State on funding priorities. That is a matter for discussion and question between the HSE and the Minister of State. It is not for me to speak on behalf of the HSE.

Chairman: I thank Ms Keogh very much. It was my error not to offer a break. It is important that we do offer breaks. I should have offered one earlier. As Chairperson, I take responsibility for that. I propose that we take a break for ten minutes? Is that agreed? Agreed.

Sitting suspended at 5.25 p.m. and resumed at 5.38 p.m.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses. Our next contributors, in the order that we pursued in the first round, are Senator Mullen and Deputy Durkan.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I will ask specific questions on money in order that we can finally get our heads around this issue.

The witnesses will understand that we are passionately concerned about people with disabilities, many of whom have been in touch with us. This issue is also about the quality of rural and community life, the choices that are being made and what is at stake. To be clear, we are asking the witnesses for a stay of execution and that request will be formalised in due course. We ask for that because there is an underlying sense of injustice about how the decision to close was reached. I acknowledge everything the witnesses have said about their interactions with the Government. The fact is we are in a different situation now; they are aware of the considerable public disquiet and they now have a public awareness asset. At this point, the witnesses do not know what we are now capable of doing as a concerned community, particularly in Cuisle's hinterland area. A very important point is that we are facing into a general election. That brings a particular dynamic of its own to the lobbying for and extraction of commitments. The witnesses have been at pains to stress how much they value Cuisle, and we take what they are saying at face value, but it does not lie with that to insist on a sudden death and shuttering of Cuisle. I hear their concerns about safety and while such concerns must always be taken seriously, as things stand the witnesses have not been condemned. They are under no legal obligation to immediately cease activities. They are insured. From everything I hear, they are in a position to show good faith by not taking a sudden decision. They have knowledge of new issues but they had a certain amount of knowledge about the gradual and developing inadequacies of the facility that always were going to need updating. It seems to me that there is a real test of the witnesses' goodwill here, not to take a sudden decision but, when members as a committee communicate formally with them, to do what they said they would do, which is to take a request back to their board. We would, however, like them to give us some indication today as to what their advice would be because in almost every situation, what the CEO, Ms Rosemary Keogh, says will determine what the board decides. Let us not pussyfoot about that. We are asking the witnesses for a stay of execution for good reason because we have not had an opportunity to explore the potential to save Cuisle.

I turn now to the issue of how Cuisle might be saved, and let us hope that in turning to the future we are not wasting our breath and that there is real goodwill on the witnesses' side towards looking at what might come from this committee about that. The witnesses talked about the significant capital costs of bringing Cuisle to a position where the association would be comfortable to continue to operate. The only figure we have heard is €1.15 million, but perhaps allowing for a further 5%. The witnesses then spoke about other unknown knowns and known unknowns. It is legitimate for them to say that they do not know the full cost if they went to address certain issues around heating or even around asbestos but they say that the projected costs they have given include full electrical installation and fire safety upgrades. As I understand it, it is not confined to that. I have two money questions for the association. We have to acknowledge at this point the very generous contribution from the Divine Word Missionaries over the years. The sum of €125,000, albeit in punts, for 25 years is less than the salaries of quite a few people in the sector might be on at the highest levels. It is a very modest amount of money. We are talking about €5,000 a year. They are proposing to give all of that back, retrospectively, therefore, the witnesses would be at no rent since the beginning of the operation. Is that not

correct? That is the first sum the witnesses have to play with.

Another sum is whatever promised funding is there to be accessed, which the witnesses cannot access under their current decision. Were they to reverse or postpone that decision, however, they then would be able to access certain moneys. They might have outstanding commitments in terms of paying heating or other bills up until the end of the lease anyway. In terms of their estimate, it is legitimate that they would have a conservative estimate and a more costly estimate because they do not know the full situation but it is always possible in these situations to identify a ballpark figure and there is an upper level and a lower level. When we subtract from that figure the moneys the witnesses know are available to them, what is the actual shortfall? I will put the question in theoretical terms. If the secret millionaire was to present himself or herself in the morning and say, "I want Cuisle to continue operating for the next ten years, I want value for money and I do not want to give you more than I have to give you, having regard to the money you are currently able to leverage from other sources, including the Divine Word Missionaries and so on", what is the figure?

In terms of my second question, the witnesses have not mentioned it but is there a current cost of running Cuisle? Leaving aside capital, there is the current cost. Is part of the witnesses' decision-making process that they have been making a loss on Cuisle as they see it and that it is a drain on their current expenses? Is that the undiscussed factor in their decision-making at this meeting? If that is the case, can they give us an idea of what closing Cuisle would release for them moneywise on an annual basis, having regard to the fact that they are committing to fundraising hotel-based holidays and so on?

To summarise the three issues, first, is there genuine goodwill about taking a serious proposal seeking a stay of execution, so to speak, back to the board? Second, what is the capital shortfall that a secret millionaire would have to come up with? Third, what is the ongoing current drain - that is a negative word I would not want to use - coming from the operation of Cuisle and has that been a factor in the decision made?

Chairman: The witnesses might take those questions.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The first comment I want to make is that anybody who thinks the IWA board does everything the CEO says has clearly not met or engaged with the IWA board. I can give a guarantee that, once a month, I have very long Friday night meetings and I do not always get out with what I wanted going in. I want to put that on the record. We have a dynamic and diverse board which takes its responsibilities extremely seriously and it would be wrong for it to be on record that that was not the case.

In terms of the capital piece, I am not trying to be obtuse when I say this but it is a difficult question to answer. When we start with the €1.15 million, if that is what it was, we can then do the Senator's calculation. It is very difficult to do the calculation when we do not know what the full cost would be at this point. However, if somebody came up with the money and it was enough to do the works and ensure that, for the next five or ten years or whatever period, any other unknown - asbestos or whatever it might be - that comes up would be secured, we would look seriously at that. I want to reassure the Senator that if a proposal comes back through the committee, and we have already stated it here, we will bring it back to the board. I do not know how many times I have said this afternoon, and I will say it again, that this is probably one of the most difficult decisions that has been made in the history of the IWA. The association was founded by eight people who were wheelchair users in 1960. That figure of eight has grown to more than 20,000 people across the country. If we include staff and volunteers in that, we are

up to approximately 25,000. This organisation has been at the heart of developing services for people with disability and representing people with disability. We are not in the business of closing services that people value if we have an alternative to doing that. I will ask Mr. Cunningham to talk about the annual operating piece, if that is okay.

Senator Rónán Mullen: That includes the answer to the question of the secret millionaire figure. I know Ms Keogh cannot be precise but it is legitimate for us to expect a ballpark figure today. The question is what amount would save Cuisle. I am not asking that question for the good of my health. Ms Keogh can tot up for me today the amount of money she could leverage from the sources I mentioned, including the payback from the Divine Word Missionaries, and subtract that from what she believes it would cost to have this building in good order in order that she is not worried about fire officer inspections or whatever for the next ten years.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The only money we could possibly allocate against the €1.15 million today is the €125,000 from the Divine Word Missionaries. As I explained earlier, the LEADER funding was for completely different works and it was very specific. It was made very clear to us when we went back to the Roscommon LEADER Partnership that that could not be used, so we are still talking about €1 million at that time, as a starting point.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: In terms of the deficit, the Senator would have seen in the paper that there were annual deficits on Cuisle. They were budgeted deficits, meaning that the board funded those every year from either reserves or fund-raising within the organisation. The BDO business plan, if the Senator looks at our overall strategy, is pricing our services across the board. That goes back to Ms Keogh's meetings with the committee and the service level arrangement process in that every service stands in its own right. That is what we have to work towards, particularly when the reserves are gone. We have been working on that across the organisation in respect of all services.

In terms of Cuisle, that was part of the reason for inviting BDO to come in because it has gone from being a service provider to being a social enterprise. BDO was giving us advice, and it was to make Cuisle a profit-making unit so that it could be revitalised-----

Ms Rosemary Keogh: And self-funding.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Self-funding in the first instance but also that we could get it to the point where it would generate surpluses that would support other services across the organisation as a section 39 body.

Senator Rónán Mullen: And the number.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Number of what?

Senator Rónán Mullen: The number in terms of what it is costing the IWA.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: The numbers are in the Senator's pack.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: They are by year, over the past ten years. A deficit of approximately €100,000 a year arises on it.

Chairman: In regard to the closure of the facility from the end of November to the beginning of March, what is the situation with regard to the staff during those three months?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The staff contracts are annualised contracts such that staff are paid

every month over 12 months, but for the months that they work. They remain on the payroll over that period.

Chairman: They are not signing on?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: No, they are not laid off during that period.

Chairman: I thank Ms Keogh. I call Deputy Durkan, who will be followed by Senator Leyden.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: We all appreciate the work the IWA has done and continues to do. That said, we have to account for Government expenditure. Even private organisations have to account for their expenditures.

In regard to the deficit, was any specific action taken to address it? I am speaking not of a stop-gap action but a single act that sought to address it for future years.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Is the Deputy's question in regard to IWA as a whole or specifically in regard to Cuisle?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: In regard to Cuisle.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Every year, IWA engages in a service arrangement process with the HSE. I do not know the exact number but we have over 30 individual service arrangements across all nine community healthcare organisations, CHOs, within the HSE. We have two service arrangements that relate specifically to Cuisle, one is in CHO 2 covering Roscommon and the other is in CHO 9. The majority of the funding comes through the CHO 2 Roscommon office. For as long as I have been in the IWA, and for many years before that, including in 2008 when the various cuts were made in the time of austerity, the IWA has negotiated and lobbied the HSE in regard to the service arrangements. In two of the past three years, we have gone into a formal dispute process with the HSE with regard to the service arrangements and the funding that is provided. I hope that answers the Deputy's question.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The IWA does that each year.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Yes.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: In the current year, under section 39, the association received an allocation of €39 million.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Yes.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Did it seek additional funding prior to receipt of that allocation or afterwards?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: We did so prior to receiving it, constantly.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Did the association regard the allocation of €39 million and €39.5 million as a response to its request for additional funding in regard to Cuisle?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: The funding for Cuisle did not change. A specific allocation of €781,000 is allocated through the section 39 service arrangement process for Cuisle.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Did the allocation which the IWA received under section 39

change from what it was the previous year?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: No, it has not changed for many years.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: When did it last change?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: In 2008.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The allocation has been €39.5 million each year since 2008.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: No. Some of our funding has changed but the Cuisle funding has not. The overall allocation has changed. The IWA's largest services are PA services. Anybody who is familiar with this service will know it is provided on an hourly basis. We bill at an agreed contracted rate, which has not changed for many years for the number of hours we provide. The HSE will regularly ask the IWA to take on increased PA hours. When this happens, we get paid for those hours.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Has the allocation for that service increased in the last eight years?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: In 2018, we got an increase in the funding for our assisted living service, ALS, which is our PA service, of €740,000.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: There is much yet to be examined in the context of what can be done. The membership of the board took the unanimous decision to close the centre, which is unusual. Is it possible to get a redacted version of the board minutes?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: If we receive a freedom of information request we will respond accordingly. That is the correct forum to request that information. I am not a company law expert, so I do not want to give the Deputy a definitive answer today.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I will rephrase. If in the interim the IWA were to offer a redacted version of the minutes of the meeting - we do not need to know individuals' names - it would be of assistance to us in making up our minds as to the way forward.

In regard to the reduction from 9,000 to 4,500 bed nights, looking at that from a business point of view, there is need for change to ensure the service is more attractive to the people it serves. Has that been done?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: Yes. As set out in detail in the additional documentation we submitted, we invested a significant sum of IWA funding on initial works on the building, we hired a sales and marketing resource to assist us in selling to people outside of our immediate membership, both in Ireland and abroad and we developed a new website and branding for Cuisle. In regard to the Deputy's question as to whether we did anything to develop the business, we did.

Chairman: The final contributor is Senator Leyden.

Senator Terry Leyden: I am surprised to hear that Ms Keogh as chief executive officer has to consult solicitors to call an EGM of the IWA. I understand that members have already sent a request and that questions have been asked about their motivations in that regard.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: As I said earlier, I am not an expert in company law. I spoke to IWA's company secretary this morning. As of this morning, we have had no request for an EGM. If we receive one, and it is within the company law context, we will absolutely hold one.

Senator Terry Leyden: I thank Ms Keogh for her response. In regard to the motion being forwarded by this Oireachtas Joint Committee of elected representatives of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann from around the country, will Ms Keogh defy that proposal? By way of clarification, when I rang the offices of the IWA I had no knowledge of whether the receptionist was in a wheelchair. I treat people with the same respect-----

Chairman: We are not going down that road.

Senator Terry Leyden: I want to make the point that-----

Chairman: No, Senator, we are not going down that road again.

Senator Terry Leyden: I am sorry but Ms Keogh does not have parliamentary privilege here: I do.

Chairman: We are not going down the road of parliamentary privilege.

Senator Terry Leyden: The Chairman allowed Ms Keogh to speak outside of her remit and make allegations about-----

Chairman: I am ruling that the Senator is out of order.

Senator Terry Leyden: I am making my point. I treat people the same. I did not know if the person I was contacting in the IWA was in a wheelchair, or not. I treat people the same. That is my style.

Chairman: Thank you Senator.

Ms Rosemary Keogh: In regard to any proposal that comes from the committee to the board, I can guarantee it will be considered by the board. It will be a matter for the board to decide.

Senator Terry Leyden: Will Ms Keogh recommend it?

Ms Rosemary Keogh: I would have to see the details of it before I could commit to that.

Senator Terry Leyden: The detail has been already outlined.

Chairman: As agreed earlier, the committee will write to the IWA expressing its views and asking for a deferment.

On behalf of the committee, I thank Ms Keogh and Mr. Cunningham for appearing before the committee to give their evidence. I again apologise for not offering a break and I hope that is accepted.

The joint committee adjourned at 6 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 27 November 2019.