

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THITHÍOCHT, PLEANÁIL AGUS RIALTAS ÁITIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, PLANNING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 28 Meán Fómhair 2016

Wednesday, 28 September 2016

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Pat Casey,	Senator Paudie Coffey,
Deputy Eoin Ó Broin,	Senator Colette Kelleher,*
	Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor.

* In the absence of Senator Grace O'Sullivan.

In attendance: Deputy Colm Brophy.

DEPUTY MARIA BAILEY IN THE CHAIR.

BUSINESS OF JOINT COMMITTEE

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: We are in public session. Apologies have been received from Senator O’Sullivan, who is being substituted for today by Senator Colette Kelleher. The Senator is most welcome.

At the request of the broadcasting and recording services, members are asked to ensure that for the duration of the meeting their mobile phones are turned off completely or switched to airplane, safe or flight mode, depending on the device used. It is not sufficient for them to leave their phones in silent mode, as the level of interference with the broadcasting system will be maintained.

In accordance with standard procedures agreed to by the Committee on Procedure and Privileges for paperless committees, all documentation for the meeting has been circulated to members on the document database.

With members’ agreement, I propose that we go into private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 9.45 a.m. and resumed in public session at 10.05 a.m.

Irish Water Safety: Chairperson Designate

Chairman: Before we commence, I must inform the witness 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 it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to 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 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. Also, Mr. O’Sullivan’s opening statement submitted to the committee will be published on the committee website following 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 Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. At the request of the broadcasting and recording services, members, witnesses and people in the Public Gallery are asked to ensure that for the duration of the meeting their mobile phones are turned off completely or switched to airplane, safe or flight mode, depending on the device used.

I welcome Mr. Martin O’Sullivan to the meeting. Last July, Mr. O’Sullivan was announced as the chairperson designate of Irish Water Safety. In line with normal procedures, the committee now has an opportunity to engage with Mr. O’Sullivan in that regard. I invite Mr. O’Sullivan to make his opening statement.

Mr. Martin O’Sullivan: I come from a small village in west Cork called Glengarriff but I have been living in Douglas in Cork. I am married to Áine and we have three children, all of whom are boys and are now very much grown up. I am a retired second level teacher; I taught English. I have been involved with Irish Water Safety in one way or another for more than

40 years - far too long. Members will have seen from my submission that I became involved initially in 1971. From being involved in Ireland I became involved at a European level where I was voted in as chair of the International Life Saving Rescue Commission. That would have been in the 1990s. That was followed by a significant number of years in that position before I was elected as a member of the board of directors of the International Life Saving Federation in the European region. This year I was voted as a member of the board for the world body of the International Life Saving Federation. Until then I was chairman of the International Life Saving world body rescue commission. The amount of time spent in the area is quite considerable, as the committee can see, and it has been a gradual process. I do not come from the left or right wing and I have made the gradual step up from being involved as an instructor, teaching life-saving and swimming, to the present point. I continue voluntarily to teach life-saving.

The Irish Water Safety organisation was established in 1945 as a section of the Red Cross. It grew and became the Irish Water Safety Association in 1971, which was around the same time I became involved. In 1987 we were amalgamated with the road and fire safety bodies to become the national safety council. We were very glad to be reappointed as a national body, standing in our own right, in 2000 by means of a statutory instrument. We are an independent statutory voluntary body, which is an unusual combination. We have hard-working staff in our headquarters in Galway, with more than 4,000 volunteer members nationwide. In many ways, our job is to teach. The volunteers teach swimming and life-saving. Our headquarters staff are involved with educating people by means of the media to have best practice when it comes to water safety. We teach swimming and life-saving, with a significant number of public safety awareness programmes and campaigns in place. In each county we have water safety area committees. We also have two dedicated committees, with one in the Curragh for the Army and the other in Templemore for the Garda. Our water safety area committees have what is called a water safety development officer, WSDO, linking the area committees with the local authority. They are paid officials.

Without a shadow of a doubt, our strongest asset is our volunteer network. The core volunteers teach a winter programme, usually beginning at this time of year and going right through until approximately Easter. There is a summer programme where our volunteers go to the beaches, outdoor pools, rivers and lakes to teach swimming and life-saving. This system is unique in Europe, as we send volunteers out to teach swimming and life-saving across the nation and outdoors. It is quite normal to have it taught indoors but we do it outdoors, on every little beach, river and lake throughout the country. We train and assess lifeguards. We do not hire them, as that is up to either the local authority or the individual private company that might employ lifeguards in a leisure centre.

One of our biggest and most important tasks is carrying out risk assessments. Irish Water Safety developed the risk assessment system now in place across Europe, which has proven a great success. We work, in that context, very closely with An Taisce and Blue Flag, for example, ensuring that a beach getting a flag must be risk assessed. Part of our work is the primary aquatic water safety, PAWS, programme, which has been accepted by the Department of Education and Skills as part of the primary schools curriculum. There were 55,000 certificates issued last year to primary schoolchildren who took part. I recognise, as incoming chairman, that much more work must be done to get the PAWS programme in place in all primary schools throughout the country.

Statistics for drownings in Ireland indicate that much work remains to be done. As the committee is probably aware, there were 122 drownings in 2015, with 66 of those being accidental.

The rest are covered under the headings of “suicide” and “undetermined”. The number of accidental drownings increased from previous years, which reminds us that the job goes on and we cannot accept such numbers. A few years ago we saw a significant decrease in the numbers drowned, and although there have not been too many serious changes, the number of 66 deaths last year was above average.

In that context, we must get people from the fishing industry involved, whether they are on the sea or off the rocks, and try to get across the message that they should wear life jackets. We work in conjunction with the other agencies, including the Coast Guard, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and Bord Iascaigh Mhara, to get the message across with a particular focus on the fishing community and anybody involved. If we consider the statistics over the years, we can see a greater number of people drown inland than do offshore or on our beaches.

Looking forward, it is necessary for us to continue to make the public aware of the dangers. We must increase the number of people we are getting to with the PAWS programme and also in our summer weeks programme, where we teach on the beaches. We need to get all the children involved. It is wonderful to go to places and remote regions and realise that every child is participating. That is the case in quite a number of rural areas, as they do not have access to swimming pools. They use the time to teach the children to swim and be capable of self-rescue and the rescuing of others. I thank all the volunteers and our hard-working staff in our headquarters in Galway.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I thank Mr. O’Sullivan for attending before the committee and outlining his vast experience in the water safety sphere. I note he has already served as vice chairman of the board and I acknowledge his many years of involvement with Irish Water Safety with his colleagues on the board. More important, we should put on the record the work of the more than 4,000 volunteers who are continuously involved with water safety at many levels throughout the country. That should be acknowledged and continuously supported. I take this opportunity to commend Irish Water Safety. I was involved in the development of the national lifeguard training centre in Tramore, County Waterford. Another one was developed in White Strand, County Clare. I presume the centres are very busy. I know from visiting the centre in Waterford that it is always busy. Can the chairperson designate tell us how the training centres have benefitted his organisation? Are more training centres of a similar scale needed?

Inland locations were mentioned in the presentation. Although I am from the coastal county of Waterford, I am conscious of the dangers, as mentioned, posed by rivers, lakes, canals and other waterways located around the country. Does the organisation intend to launch a programme that directly focuses on rivers, lakes and inland waters? How can the Oireachtas, local authorities or others assist the organisation in trying to improve safety in these areas?

My next question is on the budget available to Irish Water Safety on an annual basis and the staffing levels. I presume, like every organisation, it has limited resources. Can the organisation meet the demands placed on it with the current resources?

Mr. O’Sullivan mentioned a programme called the primary aquatic water safety, PAWS, in schools. I am a member of a school board of management and I know the school participates in the programme. What practical supports does the programme give to schools? Does the organisation subsidise swimming classes? Does it provide instructors? Does it issue swimming certificates? Will Mr. O’Sullivan expand a bit about that? He mentioned that there are issues around access to pools and involving more schools. Does the organisation plan to improve access for schools?

Deputy Pat Casey: I thank Mr. O'Sullivan for his presentation and wish him well in his role. I thank him for the 40 years of service he has given to Irish Water Safety. Senator Coffey referred to inland areas. For some reason we do not seem to think of water safety when we visit rivers or lakes like we do when we go to the beach. In my own area, there have been deaths as a result of freshwater activity. How can we address the problem?

I recognise the public awareness campaign which has resulted in an improvement in water safety over the past number of years. An exceptionally good job is being done there. I am concerned about how we can educate people about safety at freshwater locations.

Senator Colette Kelleher: As a fellow Cork person, I welcome Mr. O'Sullivan. I am from Douglas in Cork and my in-laws are from Glengarriff in Cork but we can talk about that later. I thank Mr. O'Sullivan for taking on these roles and responsibilities on a voluntary basis and I also thank all the volunteers around the country. After 40 years of experience, what does Mr. O'Sullivan see as the biggest risk we face? Are the resources at the disposal of the organisation adequate to meet that risk? What specific supports would he like from this committee and the Oireachtas, in general, to support the work of his organisation?

Chairman: I wish Mr. O'Sullivan well in his new position. Like Senator Coffey, I have a couple of questions on the PAWS programme. My own school avails of the programme. Swimming is the best skill one can give a child. Providing an awareness of the dangers of water but also of the fun aspect of it at a young age remains with the child for the rest of his or her life. How can we support raising that awareness further? Does the organisation plan to have more awareness campaigns?

I used to teach swimming, lifesaving and CPR many years ago on a voluntary basis, so I fully recognise, endorse and support the work of the organisation and the many volunteers. More often than not, volunteers go unrecognised but swimming is a skill that stays with people all their lives. I commend the organisation on all its work and wish Mr. O'Sullivan well in his new post.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Most of my questions have already been asked but I wish to compliment Irish Water Safety. Most parents ensure their children learn to swim. I have never learned to swim but I have ensured that my children can swim. I will address my inability to swim. It is crucial that people are aware of water safety. There are swimming pools where I live, so people go to the pool all the time and not to beaches. With the weather in Ireland, it is a little bit tricky and people must make hay while the sun shines. It is the 4,000 unknown volunteers who do so much work that are always forgotten about. I agree with colleagues that education is the biggest gift that we can give anyone. Educating people in schools, at pools and at beaches is important because, like everything in life, something simple can catch a person off guard thus leading to the loss of a loved one.

How is Irish Water Safety funded? What role can we, as members, play in assisting the organisation? Again, I compliment the organisation. It is so important that people are made aware of all the dangers posed by pools and beaches.

Mr. Martin O'Sullivan: The first question was on dedicated training. We have lifesaving training centres at Tramore, County Waterford, White Strand, County Clare, in Kildare and I believe there is one about to be built in Wexford. Waterford led the way with a centre located at Tramore. It is an excellent building that has all the necessary facilities. The centres have improved the lot of the people involved in training beach guards. It means people can now go

to the centre and avail of the beach next door. In the past, when people arrived in cars, they had to carry equipment long distances. The establishment of training centres has been an excellent improvement. The Clare people are looking to build another centre and we need to get one in Cork. Over the next few years, we expect to have a significant number of training centres. Perhaps not all of them will be of the same quality as the Waterford centre but they will be of a high standard.

We would welcome funding for centres from wherever. The people of Waterford and Clare did a serious amount of fund-raising for their centres. In most cases, it is a question of getting out there and raising money in order to build a station. The centres would have got moneys, and we hope to get more, from local authorities. Please bear in mind that we train the beach guards, so that they can operate on the beaches during the summertime.

We need to develop more lifesaving programmes for inland locations. A minority of our week long summer programmes are taught in rivers and lakes but the greater number are taught at beaches. There is an excellent summer programme of education on water safety at some of the lakes in County Cavan and likewise at rivers in places like Tipperary.

We must convey the message to parents but especially to children about water safety and that is where the PAWS programme comes in. The PAWS programme has been designed in such a way that the early sections of it can be done without going to a swimming pool. It is an water safety education process for primary school children. Teachers can look at our website and click on the link for the PAWS programme where they will find excellent lesson plans designed to cater for children at different levels. They will also find excellent worksheets for the children, all of which have been designed by teachers, which the children can enjoy completing and which will teach them various lessons. We are very much aware that our PAWS programme has not gone to a sufficient number of primary schools and that we must get it out to them. We have an education officer in our headquarters and he will be working hard to ensure that the programme is in place in a far greater number of primary schools.

I forget the other question.

Senator Paudie Coffey: What are the budget resources?

Chairman: Is it just local government?

Mr. Martin O'Sullivan: The Department grant amounts to just over €500,000. We are supported by the local authorities and especially by our volunteers, who fund-raise for the organisation. They are the three main sources, although the Department is the major one. Of course, our outlay is not far from that in terms of paying staff and so forth. We certainly make good use of the moneys we are given but we would be absolutely delighted if they were increased. I believe and hope the Minister is open to increasing the money. I am aware that he has a particular interest in water safety and life saving in general.

Chairman: What does Mr. O'Sullivan consider are the biggest risks?

Mr. Martin O'Sullivan: As indicated, there are probably two areas. Clearly, one is the inland waterways and the message we must convey in that regard. One can look at cases of people who drown after going out on a lake in a small boat. Just a couple of days ago there was a near-drowning incident in Killarney lakes, where waves can be quite different from the type of waves experienced on a beach. In that particular incident, all of the people were wearing life jackets, so they all survived. That is the message. We have just started conveying that message

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, PLANNING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

through the media advising that with life jackets, the message is in the name - "life jacket". We will continue to try to convey to people that they should never be in or near the water without wearing a life jacket.

The other issue is fishermen, and the answer is the same. The number of drownings has reduced a little in recent years. Thankfully, it has improved due to wearing the life jacket. There was a time some years ago when fishermen simply did not wear life jackets. We used to run summer week programmes in places such as Castletownbere and when we looked at the classes we realised that they were almost all female because the boys were going fishing. That has changed and we have both boys and girls involved in learning to swim, how to self rescue and how to rescue other people.

Chairman: Thank you, Mr. O'Sullivan, for your assistance to the committee this morning and for travelling up last night to attend. I wish you very well. It is a new position for you and you come to it with vast experience and knowledge, which will benefit you greatly in your new role. On behalf of the committee I wish you the very best in that role.

The joint committee adjourned at 10.35 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 12 October 2016.