

To:

Ombudsman for Children's Office
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From:

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from behalf of

Inishbofin Secondary School Steering Group
Inishbofin Island
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Dear Nuala Ward and Dr. Niall Muldoon,

I am writing to ask for your advice and support regarding the rights and welfare of children living on Inishbofin island. Children living on Inishbofin are currently forced to move away from home at the age of 12 in order to attend secondary school.

Inishbofin Secondary School Steering Group, together with the support from GRETB, prepared a submission to the Minister of Education with regard to setting up a secondary school on Inishbofin. This was done to seek the assistance of the Minister of Education to facilitate the education of our children on their home island, where they can live with their parents. GRETB was ready to support Inishbofin in setting up a secondary school. Different community organisations on the island are ready to provide the required facilities such as the extensive three-story Community Centre on Inishbofin, it currently houses the community creche and afterschool on the ground floor, leaving the upper two floors available to support a secondary school. The building also provides a kitchen, a full length sports hall, stage for performances, library, disabled toilets, a lift and stairs to the upper floors. Outside there is a safe well-equipped playground and car park. Also a number of qualified teachers live on the island. What is needed is the funding to run the school.

An extensive research report accompanied the submission to the Department of Education. This submission was refused by the department, on the basis that there were not enough children to warrant the funding. We feel that all children are equal and deserving of their needs being met, no child should be left behind as reinforced by the EEAS, the diplomatic service of the European Union, where they stated that "they reinforce its commitment to combating for a fairer world for children

an inclusive world where no child is left behind”¹. If the school was opened the numbers would grow as living on the island would be made viable for families with children or planning to have children, and families who have left the island could now return with their children. GRETB who were interested in managing the school require the funding and the backing of the Department of Education.

We are now approaching you for guidance and support on how we could and should proceed in a situation where children living on our island are essentially refused some of their basic rights. We believe that several rights are being violated (URCRC Articles 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 18, 27, 28, 30, 33 & 34):

- **The right to be safe:** When children are forced to move away from home at the age of 12, the Government fails in their responsibility to respect and support parents who have the responsibility for their children and their upbringing in this digital age. Parents’ ability to protect their children is significantly weakened when children live away from their parents’ care and supervision.
- **The right to be different, but equal:** Children and families living on Inishbofin are discriminated against by not enabling them to live at home during secondary school education. As a result they are unable to or have the right to fully enjoy and take part in their island community, their culture and to foster their island identity. This puts children and families living on Inishbofin in an unequal position compared to others because of where they come from. The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 - 2020 ‘Better outcomes brighter futures’ makes a direct association between education and community: “Our vision is for all children and young people to enjoy growing up in Ireland, to enjoy school, play, family and community. Childhood is precious.”²
- **The right to attend school:** Children living on Inishbofin currently do not have the right to attend secondary school. It is only after they’ve moved to the mainland when this is made possible for them. The European Small Islands Federation has also highlighted these issues stating that: Education: “Children in later classes are forced to live on the mainland. Virtual possibilities will be depending on the population sizes, the smallest islands are threatened on the education issue”³ When parents have to leave with their children they often have to leave their jobs on the island which also threatens the vitality and human resources on the island for remaining islanders, thus undermining a whole community.
- **The right to a home:** Children from Inishbofin currently do not have the right to live with their parents if they wish to attend secondary school. By not making secondary school education possible on the island, children have to move and live away from home. It’s not the choice of the child or the parents. The children are separated from their siblings, father, mother, grandparents and extended family. They only get to see them during the weekend, if the weather allows.

¹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/world-children%E2%80%93leaving-no-child-behind_en

² <https://assets.gov.ie/23796/961bbf5d975f4c88adc01a6fc5b4a7c4.pdf>

³ <https://europeansmallislands.com/2021/01/28/imagining-the-small-islands/>

The Government currently provides a Remote Area Boarding Grant to the child, to facilitate the child living in digs with a host family. The Remote Area Boarding Grant is maximum €4,945 per pupil per annum, which means a bit less than €100 per week for someone else to take care of your child minimum five days a week during their adolescent years. The grant does not facilitate a parent to accompany their child, even if a child has medical needs or special requirements. This can lead to a situation where the parents are required to source and fund additional accommodation to take care of their child on the mainland. Parents must then fund and pay bills of two houses and households. This additional cost is discriminatory. The current housing crisis has made this very expensive and difficult for parents. We feel this is not meeting the needs of our children, where having an island secondary school would alleviate all these problems.

- **The right to family and care:** The Government has not fulfilled their responsibility to respect and support parents bringing up their children. The state has failed in their responsibility to recognise that both parents have the responsibility for a child's upbringing and development. When children don't live with their parents, it is very challenging for parents to be adequately involved in their children's lives to provide direction, emotional support, supervision and educational support. This is highlighted even more if the child has additional learning requirements, Autism, Down Syndrome, dietary needs, epilepsy, asthma or other medical needs. The need to have their family with them on a daily basis for all the life circumstances children currently face during their adolescent years is just the same as other children living on the mainland. The state does not currently respect the rights and responsibilities of parents to provide direction to their child that is appropriate for their development.
- **The right to adults doing what's best for them.** The Government and the Department of Education does not consider the best interests of the children of Inishbofin by depriving them of a secondary school education on their home island with their parents.

We believe that the state is currently failing

- in applying the URCRC rights to every child regardless of their status,
- in having the children's best interest as their primary concern,
- in doing all it could do to protect the rights of children living on Inishbofin, and
- in respecting the rights and responsibilities of parents to guide and protect their children.

I look forward to receiving your advice and direction on how to proceed, and how you could support us in approaching the Government on this. For your convenience, we have attached the submission prepared by Inishbofin Secondary School Steering Group and the relevant Appendix.

Best regards,



Tuuli Rantala