

## First Masonic Charities Seminar in Ireland 2017

Compiled by W Bro Robert Bashford

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Spent a very informative day, up in Carrickfergus, in the Loughshore Hotel attending the First Masonic Charities Seminar in Ireland. This was an initiative promoted by our Assistant Grand Master - Rt Wor Bro Leslie Nixon, who with his overview of our Masonic Charities, brought the seven main Masonic Charities together, to present their various briefings in respect of their origins, history, achievements and hopes for the future.

These Charities, of course are: -

The Masonic Orphans Welfare Committee celebrating their centenary this year.

The Masonic Welfare Fund.

The Masonic Girls Benefit Fund.

The Masonic Boys Benefit Fund.

The Belfast Masonic Charity Fund.

The Victoria Jubilee Masonic Benevolent Fund.

The Belfast Masonic Widow's Fund.

After introductions from Warren Keil the Event Co-Ordinator and then a welcome from Rt Wor Bro Leslie Nixon, the Seminar began with an excellent presentation from Mr Myles McKeown, Head of Compliance, and Enquiries in the N.I. Charity Commission. His responsibilities include investigations into the mismanagement of Charities and annual monitoring. Myles began his presentation with a broad outline on the new Framework, that has been set up to support and regulate Charities in Northern Ireland, and then went on to give a comprehensive briefing on how the system works and what is expected from our Charity Committees to ensure successful submissions of our accounts, annual returns, and other supporting documentation.

One interesting fact that Myles did share was that to date some 5,850 Northern Ireland Charities have already registered under the new system, and some 50 applicant bodies have had their applications refused. However, and this was a statistic that did surprise me, Myles expects the Charity Commissioners to receive a further 10,000 + applications, from the remainder of N.I. Charities, hoping to register as a Charity. With regard to accounts, Myles noted that 1800 sets of accounts have already been submitted to the Commission and a further 5000 are expected in the next 18 months.

Our second speaker, Dr Jim McCormick from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation was equally informative, as he clearly and succinctly gave us some shocking current statistics re levels of poverty in Northern Ireland, based on detailed research published by the J.R.F in 2016 in a report entitled **the 2016 Monitoring Poverty Report in Northern Ireland**. Here we learned that some 20% of the total N.I. population were living in poverty, on average over the last two years (2014 and 2015).

Average pay in Northern Ireland in 2016 is lower today, than it was a decade ago, and our unemployment rate in Northern Ireland is 5% higher than in the rest of the UK. Jim made a very detailed presentation, supported with graphs and statistics from the 2016 report. He was able to advise that the 2017 report would be issued shortly, and that unofficially, he could advise that the figures have not improved over the past 12 months.

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It was hard to believe that some 2 hours has passed very quickly, since the seminar commenced, and we broke at the end of Dr McCormick's presentation for an excellent and tasty lunch, and an opportunity to speak with some of the many other representatives present from the local Masonic District Charity Committees in Antrim and members of The Provincial Grand lodge of Antrim. It was during these discussions that I learned about an interesting initiative currently being run by The Grand Lodge of British Columbia under the title **The Masonic Volunteer Driver Programme**.

This is their main initiative based in Vancouver where the Grand Lodge provides a fleet of seventeen vehicles and a pool of volunteer drivers to collect and deliver patients to and from their cancer treatment appointments, as needed. To date this initiative of The Grand Lodge of British Columbia delivers some 35,000 trips for an annual total of 2,800 Cancer sufferers, and cover some 700,000 miles every year. This was another initiative that I had not been aware of, but clearly our Charity Committees, keep abreast of these developments, so they can promote best practice in their own particular areas.

After lunch we then enjoyed a variety of excellent presentations from representatives of our various Masonic charities. And so, it went on, report after report, highlighting the progress and problems specific to each particular charity. However, in general, it became clear that the demand for funds from our various charities exceeds the donations collected at Lodge level. Part of this shortfall can be explained in the drops in our membership over recent years, and another contributing factor, has been the growth in donations by our Lodges to other non-Masonic charities, worthwhile as they may be. This point was clearly made to all present, that we, as Lodge Members should support our in-house charities, before donating our shrinking charity collections elsewhere. As we used to claim - **Charity should begin at home**. At the very least, if a Lodge is getting financial support for a member or his family, they should, as a matter of form be donating part of their charity collection to the Charity concerned.

Brethren, we should acknowledge the work put in to the organisation of this most useful and informative Seminar by our Assistant Grand Master - Rt Wor Bro Leslie Nixon and his two assistants, Wor Bro Warren Kiel Events Co-Ordinator, and Wor Bro Billy Beattie Co-Ordinating Secretary. Then we need to thank our two principal non-Masonic keynote speakers and the Management Committees of our seven Charities, for all their dedication and assistance in making this first Masonic Charities Seminar, the success that it has been.

Clearly, with the ongoing drop in our membership and the pressures from non-Masonic charities, we face some difficult times ahead. However, after participating in this seminar, I am convinced that we have the right people in the right roles to successfully plan our way ahead, and eventually return to the light.

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The Provincial Grand Lodge of Antrim was selected by The Assistant Grand Master to host this first seminar and in the years ahead, similar seminars may well be held in other Masonic Provinces throughout the Constitution. One can but hope that these future events will be able to expand and develop our progress from this first seminar, so that knowledge of the work being done on behalf of our Brethren and Lodges becomes much better known by all.

I am grateful to Rt Wor Bro Leslie Nixon for his kind invitation to attend this first Masonic charities seminar and can honestly say that I learned much of interest from my attendance on the day.

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Pictures from the First Masonic Charities Seminar- Carrickfergus 2017

