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McVERRY TRUST'S €172K RENT FOR DERELICT HOME

MoS investigation also reveals charity bought a house from own IT head

EXCLUSIVE

By **Michael O'Farrell**
INVESTIGATIONS EDITOR

CONTROVERSY-hit housing charity the Peter McVerry Trust wasted €172,000 in funds for the homeless by renting a derelict and uninhabitable property for more than five years, an Irish Mail on Sunday investigation reveals.

The country's largest housing charity also bought a house from its own head of IT for €170,000 in another undisclosed property deal that was not declared as a related-party transaction, something that is required by governance and transparency rules.

Both the undeclared house purchase and the scale

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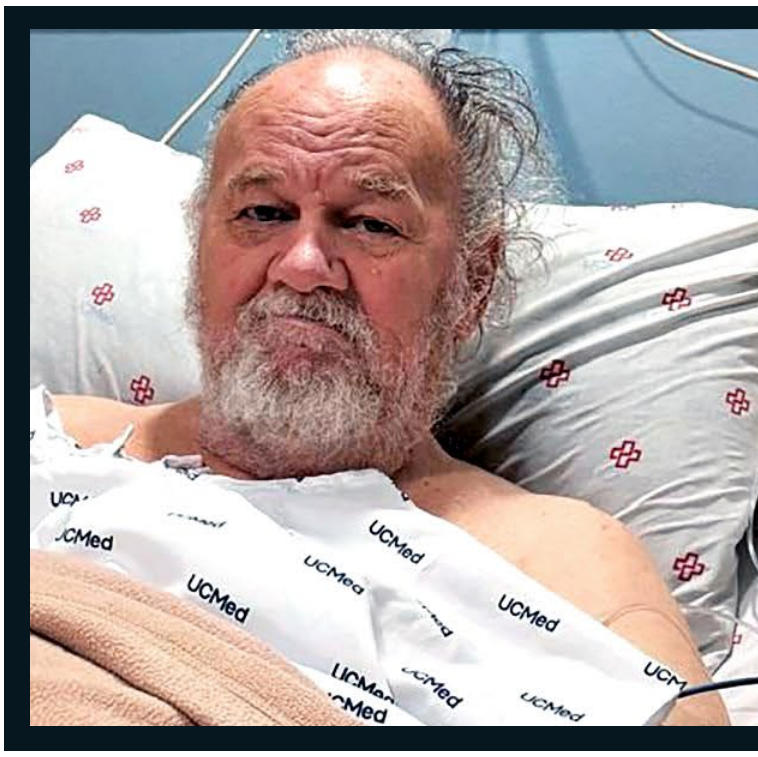

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

DAD'S PLEA TO MEGHAN: See me one more time before I die

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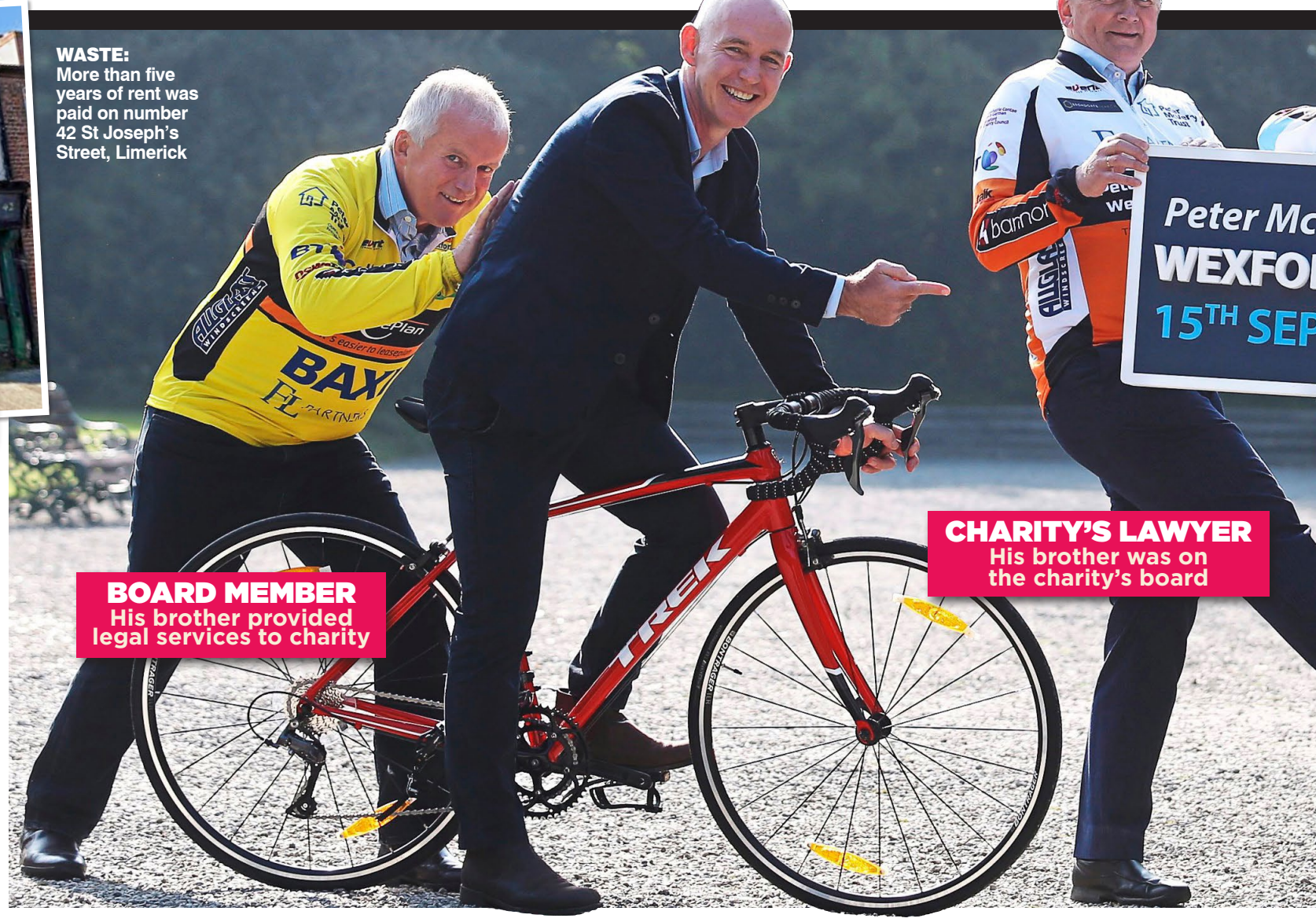
Deals two reports

DERELICT AND UNIHABITABLE
€172k in rent paid



WASTE: More than five years of rent was paid on number 42 St Joseph's Street, Limerick

BOARD MEMBER
His brother provided legal services to charity

CHARITY'S LAWYER
His brother was on the charity's board

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of the wasted rental payments were not uncovered during last year's investigations by the Charities Regulator and the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority (AHBRA). These regulatory probes have cost the taxpayer more than €400,000.

Today's revelations come as the Peter McVerry Trust (PMVT) seeks to move on from recent scandals involving conflicts of interest, poor financial controls and millions in misspent funds.

It will also fuel fears that the Government has failed to properly regulate the country's Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs).

With more than 400 AHBs in the sector, controlling as much as €10billion in assets, the chair of the Dáil spending watchdog this weekend expressed fears that 'another Peter McVerry-style scandal may be lurking'.

'It was a nightmare, an absolute nightmare'

As a result of the mismanagement, during the 18-year rule of former CEO Pat Doyle, taxpayers have so far had to bail out PMVT by €15m, with no guarantee the charity will survive.

Recent investigations by inspectors from the Charities Regulator and the Housing Regulator were aimed at disclosing all financial breaches, allowing PMVT to move on with a clean sheet.

According to the Charities Regulator, its investigation was 'carried out by an internal forensic accountant and a senior forensic accountant from Deloitte' at a cost of €212,185. The total cost of AHBRA's statutory investigation was €197,015.25.

As recently as two weeks ago, amid extraordinary Public Accounts Committee (PAC) revelations of expenditure on a Peacock enclosure and an unauthorised lift for then CEO Doyle, PMVT refiled new accounts for 2022 and 2023 to take account of the regulators' findings.

These re-filed accounts contain various related-party transactions that had not been previously disclosed as required by transparency rules.

However, our investigation confirms the inspectors missed glaring examples of poor governance during their inquiries, raising questions about what else may have been missed.

One money-wasting deal the inspectors failed to get to the bottom of involves the rental of a Limerick property that was uninhabitable.

In this instance, the charity ended up paying €2,500 a month in rent from July 2017 to March 2023 for a property no one could be housed in. A total of €172,000 was wasted throughout this 69-month period.

The property was later bought by PMVT for €250,000 in a controversial 2023 purchase that was examined by inspectors from the Charities Regulator.

According to the inspectors' report, PMVT was originally going to buy this property itself, but decided not to when the soon-to-be owner approached Mr Doyle, saying he wanted to invest in housing. Mr Doyle suggested this individual could buy the property, renovate it and then PMVT could rent it.

The report confirms the then-owner of the Limerick property also has other properties in Dublin that he rents to PMVT.

However, the Charity Regulator's report does not reveal the property was derelict and unsuitable for housing when PMVT rented it.

Planning files confirm the property was uninhabitable when PMVT agreed a 20-year lease in July 2017. Planning permission to make it suitable for human habitation was not made until April 2022 – more than five years after PMVT commenced paying rent.

A letter compiled on behalf of the owner by the architect states: 'The site has been in a state of disrepair and vacant for a number of years… the existing flat roofs are currently leaking and in bad condition with damp spots internally in several locations.

'Internally, the condition of the walls and floor is very bad with some minor fire damage in a section, mould in other areas with damp spots throughout… there is a need of a full refreshment to make this building occupy-able.'

Despite the unlivable condition of the building, PMVT inexplicably agreed to rent it.

It is likely these funds, rather than going to house those in need, helped the owner to pay for the renovation of the property. According to the inspector's report, the housing charity bought the property for €250,000 in March 2023.

'It was not a forensic audit'

However, PMVT did not have the €250,000 at the time as it was waiting for approved State funding.

Instead, according to the report, PMVT agreed to take a loan which was channelled through a trust firm business that the Limerick owner used to hold his property.

This loan was not approved by the board or the audit committee. There was no signed agreement and the money was paid into a separate charity to the McVerry Trust.

The cost of this loan, which the inspectors were unable to establish by the time they published their report, remains unknown.

The charity this week confirmed more than five years of rent had been paid on the Limerick building.

HEAD OF IT: Sold a house to the charity

CHEQUE: PMVT employee Mark Durham, second left, collecting a €23,000 Winning Streak lottery prize in 2017

failed to unearth

EX-CEO PAT DOYLE
In charge of the PMVT charity for 18 years

CHARITY EVENT: Launching the 2018 Wexford Cycle were (l to r) co-founder of the annual event Dick Lavelle; broadcaster Ray D'Arcy; event co-founder Dick's brother Mick Lavelle; Ex PMVT CEO Pat Doyle; and event co-founder Ray Cotter

NO CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARED OVER LAW FIRM

THE Peter McVerry Trust (PMVT) did not make a conflict of interest declaration over significant legal fees it paid to a law firm run by a brother of a director of the charity.

The matter was among the findings of a report by the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority (AHBRA) into various concerns at PMVT.

The report did not name the legal firm's founder – or his brother – but both have since been publicly identified.

The law firm, Lavelle Partners, was founded by Michael Lavelle in 1987.

He is a brother of Richard Lavelle, a vet in Sandymount, Dublin, who was a director of PMVT until December last year.

According to the AHBRA report, Lavelle Partners acted as PMVT's 'solicitors for all legal requirements with regard to property purchase, leasing etc'.

Despite this, the report found 'no evidence of a potential conflict of interest declaration or potential conflict discussion at board or sub-committee level' about any possible conflicts of interest. During the AHBRA's inquiries, another board member had confirmed that 'everybody knew' that PMVT director Richard Lavelle was a brother of Michael Lavelle.

However, the board member insisted that this never 'stood out to them as a potential issue'.

He added that it had been the decision of the former CEO, Pat Doyle – who stepped down as the charity's boss in May of 2023 – to bring Lavelle Partners on board as solicitors. According to the report: 'When the board member concerned [Richard Lavelle] was queried about a possible conflict of interest with their brother conducting business with the AHB they responded that "I have taken advice on it and there is no conflict of interest from my role".' In their report, the AHBRA inspectors noted that total payments to Lavelle Partners 'in 2022 amounted to €1,424,542 and for the period under review in 2023 amounted to €247,994'.

The payments were declared as related party transactions in the recently filed 2023 accounts. Since being identified publicly by the Irish Times, Lavelle Partners has since challenged these figures in a legal letter to the AHBRA. The law firm's letter also challenged what it said were 'inaccuracies' concerning conflict of interest questions and fees.

It further stated there was 'no basis' for the reported figures, and that there was no conflict of interest as Richard Lavelle had no role in selecting or delivering legal services.

According to Lavelle Partners, the fees received by the firm were €297,534 in 2022, and another €312,892 between January and August 2023. The letter added: 'We were surprised that incorrect figures were used without being checked by the inspectors.'

It said in a statement: 'Our records show that Peter McVerry Trust entered a 20-year lease on a property in Limerick on the 1st July 2017 at a cost of €2,500 per month.

'It is unclear to the current board and senior management why the lease was undertaken by the former CEO.'

A further transaction missed by inspectors involves a house in Athy, Co. Kildare that was purchased for €170,000 from long-term charity employee and head of IT Mark Durham and his wife Sandra in 2022, who live within 800 meters of the then-charity CEO Pat Doyle.

The three-bed property was later registered to PMVT on the land registry folio in January 2023. But the purchase, which was funded via Kildare County Council, has never been declared by PMVT as a related party transaction.

Approached by the MoS this week, Mr Durham, who always acted appropriately during the sale, confirmed he had sold the house to his employer.

'That should have been [declared] because that went to the housing development people,' he said when asked about PMVT's failure to declare the deal as a related party transaction.

'That was all officially done. It went to Kildare County Council, they paid the money to our solicitor. Everything was properly done… I'm surprised, actually.'

Mr Durham said the deal was problematic as PMVT was overwhelmed and unable to process purchases promptly.

'It was a nightmare, an absolute nightmare. It took us months and months but I wasn't going to complain because it was my company and it was a charity.

'Everyone's overworked. There were too many properties, so they just couldn't be processed on time… we did nearly a favour, because I could have sold for much more because of the length of time it took to sell it. It went into the next bloody year and I could have got another five of six thousand more, but we wouldn't do that,' he told the MoS.

Asked if he was a friend of Mr Doyle, he said: 'I know him from years ago. That's about it. We would have known him for years – schools and things like that – but he was my boss's boss.'

He said he declared the sale to Revenue and paid Capital Gains Tax of €7,639, and that he had originally bought the Athy property for €140,000 in 2004.

Asked about the charity's failure to declare the deal, he said: 'I know they are tidying up a lot of things. Maybe they missed my one.'

In their statement, PMVT said the Athy purchase had been at market value and had been 'executed in a compliant manner'.

The charity admitted: 'This purchase was not recorded as a related-party transaction, as it should have been, in the 2022 financial statements, and this omission forms part of historical weaknesses in accounting standards in PMVT.'

They added that the property was acquired 'for a family experiencing homelessness,' and has been used for this purpose since 2022.

Asked about its inspector's failure to spot the deals disclosed today, a spokesperson for the Charities Regulator said: 'The scope of the investigation was to review and identify, in a timely manner, the principal compliance and governance failures relating to charity law. The report makes it clear that the investigation "was not designed to identify all circumstances of noncompliance or other irregularity… that may exist".

AHBRA also defended its report. A spokesperson said: 'It was not a forensic audit, and the Act does not require AHBRA to conduct property condition assessments, planning reviews, commercial valuations or detailed examinations of individual transactions.'

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Fresh scandal 'lurking' amid poor AHB oversight

By **John Drennan**

THE Government has been accused of failing to properly regulate the scandal-hit Peter McVerry Trust and the country's 400-plus Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) and a similar controversy is 'lurking'.

It follows a series of financial controversies involving the charity and a recent report by the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority, which found that more than half of the 33 AHBs assessed in 2024 were not compliant with the rules.

AHBs are not-for-profits that receive public funds to provide affordable housing. There are 438 of them, managing 68,000 homes, with €1.95billion in annual rent and almost €10billion in assets – and ongoing debts of €8.6billion. The Department of Housing provided nearly €1.5billion to AHBs last year alone, through various grant schemes.

But political confidence in the sector has been damaged by financial scandals involving the Peter McVerry Trust, which needed a €15million taxpayer-funded bailout.

Social Democrats housing spokesman Rory Hearne warned AHBs are 'not sufficiently accountable – and the State needs to move to change that'. The Dublin North-West TD said the huge upsurge in housing held by AHBs has 'created the need for a strong regulator' because the boards of housing bodies are being 'overwhelmed by a host of new responsibilities'.

PAC chair John Brady said: 'Given the scale of the Approved Housing Bodies, there has to be a concern that another Peter McVerry Trust style case is lurking.'

His Sinn Féin colleague Eoin Ó Broin said former housing minister Darragh O'Brien has 'serious questions' to answer about oversight. 'The big question we must answer is, as hundreds of millions are invested, do we have credible oversight now?'