

Saving megastar Ryan

John Mooney and Beau Donnelly explore how RTE's 'barter account' became a slush fund to schmooze guests – and keep stars happy in a time of cost cuts



The generosity of Dee Forbes and other RTE executives to Ryan Tubridy and his agent Noel Kelly seems to have known no bounds. Like several people in the senior echelons of RTE, Tubridy availed of the excesses offered by the “slush fund” run by the broadcaster’s commercial department.

On at least one occasion Tubridy personally sought out the commercial department’s largesse. He raised eyebrows last year when he asked that RTE provide a chauffeur to ferry Niamh Tyndall, an executive with Kelly’s talent management agency, to a Renault event. The cost to RTE was €874.

Like the others now in the spotlight, that payment was routed through RTE’s barter account with Astus, a London-based media company. Neither Tyndall, Tubridy nor NK Management responded to questions yesterday.

“Tubridy had to have known just how cash-strapped RTE was at the time,” Catherine Murphy, deputy chairwoman of the public accounts committee (PAC), said yesterday. How could he arrange for a chauffeur for his friends at the click of his fingers?

“This demonstrates how there were no controls on the commercial department. You can’t ignore the fact that RTE were laying off staff and cutting costs when this was happening.”

Tubridy, 50, was not alone however. The Astus fund was used by RTE commercial for cocktail parties, client lunches and trips abroad.

On Thursday the PAC was told that more than €1 million had gone through the account over a decade.

It has been used to spend €275,000 on corporate hospitality, including for the Rugby World Cup, ten-year Irish Rugby Football Union season tickets and a European football final in 2019. It was even used to cover the cost of events run by Renault to the value of €30,586. The payments were recorded in the account at a value of €47,477.

Colm Burke, a member of the PAC, told the committee that the account was a slush fund – he said it met the definition in *Black’s Law Dictionary*, which says it is “a reserve of money held secretly by a

company that [had] no accountability for its use”. He said: “This is exactly what we are talking about. This is a slush fund, so let us stop talking about it being a barter account.”

One source who spoke on condition of anonymity said: “Astus became a verb. On occasion, more members of RTE attended events than clients.”

It was also used to cover the cost of taking advertising clients to concerts by the Eagles, Harry Styles and Westlife. Food and drink were laid on, often at up to €53.30 a head. Some events were attended by more members of the commercial team than by guests.

“It is clear the barter account became a vehicle for concealment,” said Timmy Dooley, a member of the Oireachtas media committee.

The concealment began in February 2020 when RTE executives were renegotiating Tubridy’s contract. They found that an extra €120,000 had been credited to his account in the previous three years, while he under-delivered on his contractual obligations.

Tubridy had inexplicably been paid €20,000 more in 2017 and an extra €50,000 in both 2018 and 2019. These transactions have yet to be explained and are the subject of a review by the consultancy Grant Thornton.

According to sources the 2017 payment is possibly related to Tubridy’s involvement in launching RTE Player, the broadcaster’s on-demand streaming service.

To solve the accounting discrepancy, RTE proposed a side deal. In return for Tubridy agreeing to sacrifice a €120,000 loyalty or bonus payment payable at the end of his contract, RTE would forgo the money it had already paid him.

If it had remained secret, that pact was designed to save everyone’s blushes, which partly explains why the broadcaster did not move earlier to correct Tubridy’s stated salary. At the time, RTE was in the throes of a cost-cutting exercise, enforcing pay cuts and seeking redundancies. It had also called for reform of the licence fee system.

The executives involved probably had in mind the public reaction if they had to publish details of Tubridy’s real 2020 earnings. If the bonus payment had been made it would have shown a 25 per cent increase in the presenter’s salary at a time when RTE had promised to reduce presenters’ compensation.

The agreement itself was not illegal. In fact RTE sought advice from Richard Howard, a partner at audit company Deloitte, to ensure that it was within its fiscal rules as the accounts for 2018 and

2019 had not been finalised, according to insiders familiar with events.

The benefits to Tubridy were obvious. The deal permitted Kelly to negotiate the presenter’s contract and allowing him to enhance his earnings after years of reductions. This is exactly what happened.

Agreeing to continuous salary cuts on behalf of his most lucrative client was never on the cards for Kelly, whose abrasive personality is synonymous with his ability to extract fees from the national

broadcaster. In the talks that followed, RTE and Kelly entered a three-way deal in which the broadcaster agreed to secure an extra payment of €75,000 for Tubridy from a commercial partner. To get the deal over the line, RTE

agreed to underwrite the arrangement should its commercial division fail to find a sponsor. In return, Tubridy would make a limited number of guest appearances for the sponsor.

If it had worked, the scheme would again save the broadcaster the embarrassment of increasing Tubridy’s salary at a time when austerity was being fuelled by the effect of the pandemic.

It was genius in its simplicity and might have worked had a “routine audit” of RTE’s accounts this year not zeroed in on the suspect payments, which were possibly highlighted by someone inside the broadcaster.

Tubridy received the first instalment of €75,000 from Renault, the sponsor of *The Late Late Show*, in 2020 but the carmaker did not renew the agreement the next year.

By 2022 Tubridy’s agent was asking RTE to make up the difference, which the broadcaster had committed itself to do.

When Kelly pressed the issue in March, Forbes, the station’s former director-general, devised a plan to funnel two payments, worth a total of €150,000, to Kelly. It was a decision that ultimately forced her to resign after revelations in *The Sunday Times* a week ago.

Geraldine O’Leary, the only other executive who knew about the two invoices paid through the barter account, has said that her knowledge of the matter was limited to instructions received from Forbes. She told the PAC on Thursday that no questions were raised internally about the invoicing process until March. Her recollection of events is disputed, however.

The Sunday Times has established that O’Leary was directly made aware of questions raised internally in relation to one

“They didn’t expect to be caught. This says a lot about culture at RTE”

Only swift and radical reform can overturn this shoddy governance

DAVID W DUFFY



The crisis engulfing RTE has taken on a life of its own as its staff, trade unions and politicians all vent their understandable anger and disappointment over the recent revelations about how one presenter was paid in a labyrinthine manner that would be hard to make up.

Trust in RTE now appears to be at rock bottom, based on the current controversy and not helped by the boardroom leak last April on the process of appointing a new director-general, who is in effect the chief executive.

The government recently announced that it expects to be in a position shortly to finalise the terms of reference for a review of the culture and governance in RTE. The longer the review takes, the longer the organisation will be in suspended animation.

Based on the revelations to date, it would appear that the board has failed

to perform some of its key roles and responsibilities in terms of effective oversight, holding the executive to account, robust and constructive challenge of the executive, and risk management.

It also appears that too much power and authority has been given to the director-general and the board has failed to hold them accountable for the use of this delegated authority.

The executive does not appear to have been functioning as an effective and cohesive team. It looks like a case of a director-general without sufficient checks and balances in the governance framework to counter her. There also appears to be a culture where people are afraid to speak out about bad, dangerous or illegal practices. What channels did the board have with the executive or key managers without the director-general also being in the room?

There is a strong case of governance 101 for the board, as they don’t appear to have a good grasp of their duties as directors. “We didn’t know and we didn’t ask” seems to have been the mantra.

The issue of pay for the top stars has been a hot topic for many years and should have been a key risk in the risk register given its potential to damage the

reputation of the organisation and its relations with the government.

So what are the governance options going forward that may help to restore trust in the RTE, the board and the executive?

The government could decide to do nothing and leave the current board in place until the external review is complete. This may be the right thing to do from a due process point of view, but I suspect this will not satisfy all the stakeholders. So doing nothing is not an option with the current board.

From a political perspective, the government may want heads to roll, and the easiest one would be for the chairwoman to be replaced by an interim replacement until the governance review is complete. This may be grossly unfair to the current chairwoman, but political expediency may come into play. Unfortunately, the buck does stop with the chairwoman.

The acting director-general has also indicated that the new executive would need to be reconstituted once the new director-general is installed. The board must be all over this to ensure that all executives with the appropriate integrity and skill sets are appointed.

Another option would be to sack the whole board now and replace it with an

“The board don’t appear to have a good grasp of their duties as directors”

interim board. However, this would be risky as the government might face legal actions from the board members as their reputations would be damaged.

An interim option could be replacing the board members as their terms of office come to an end and replacing them with new people with skills and experience more aligned with RTE’s future. This could also happen during the government’s review if any terms of office fall due during the review period.

However, the government’s challenge here will be to attract new directors before the review is out. Who would want to risk their reputations – you have only one – in an uncertain future RTE environment? So this might not fly.

Finally, the review’s outcome may end up calling for an entirely new board. If this were the case, the government would face a real dilemma. Should it sack the whole board or just specific people? Exiting certain board members would be fraught with risk on all fronts.

However, sacking the whole board might draw a line in the sand between the past controversies and hopefully a bright new dawn for RTE, but it does have its downsides. The main one is the loss of valued corporate memory. But then again, maybe everyone wants to bury the past and move on.

Once the government review is completed, there will no doubt be a need for a more robust governance framework at the board and organisation level in RTE. For example, having clarity on which matters only the board can decide on – approving the annual budget, the statutory accounts, changes in the governance structures, etc. There also needs to be clarity on which decisions the new director-general can take without reverting to the board for approval.

These decisions would typically include:

- Approving payments and contracts up to a certain level;
- Hiring staff below the executive level;
- Day-to-day operational decisions.

Finally, any organisation that needs to undergo the fundamental changes required at RTE will need strong leadership at the board and executive level.

Radical reform is required in the governance of RTE. Nothing less will do. RTE is in the last-chance saloon.

David W Duffy is a founder and chief executive of the Corporate Governance Institute, which operates in more than 50 countries

Faces caught up in a scandal, from left: Siún Ní Raghallaigh, chairwoman of the RTE board; Jim Jennings, RTE director of content; Dee Forbes, former RTE director-general; Noel Kelly, Ryan Tubridy's agent; Adrian Lynch, interim RTE deputy director-general; Anne O'Leary, RTE board member; Richard Collins, RTE chief financial officer; and Geraldine O'Leary, RTE group head of commercial



invoice settled through the barter account more than a year ago. The PAC last week described these two transactions as deceitful after interrogating RTE executives and members of the board, most of whom had no knowledge of the side deal.

Kelly was instructed to create invoices covering 2021 and 2022. The invoices, he was told, were to be made out to Astus and not RTE. Kelly generated two invoices for €75,000 each on behalf of CMS Marketing, a company he controls, and sent them to RTE.

They stipulated that the monies were to be paid into a bank account controlled

by CMS. RTE forwarded the invoices to Astus, whose account was used as a slush fund to cover the cost of paying for hospitality, entertainment and other items RTE wanted to keep off the books.

Forbes has already resigned but more heads could roll as the scandal continues to play out. Grant Thornton is currently examining the 2017-19 overpayments, having already inquired into transactions routed through Astus.

The results of the second investigation are imminent and could have dire consequences for RTE's management and

board, which could ultimately be replaced by caretakers at the government's behest. Tubridy's broadcasting career, already on ice, may suffer a similar fate to those of the board members.

Tubridy initially said the issues were a matter for RTE but then apologised for not correcting the public record when RTE repeatedly understated his salary. Neither he nor Kelly have responded to questions.

"The public are outraged by this," said Murphy, the public accounts committee member. "We have been repeatedly given misleading and wrong information about the salaries of the top earners."

She added: "We are being drip-fed with information. Many of these issues were known by senior figures in RTE. I think they didn't expect to be caught. I think that says everything about the culture at the senior echelons of RTE."

RTE is waiting for the results of the Grant Thornton investigation into the 2017-19 top-up payments to Tubridy before commenting further.

The broadcaster said yesterday: "RTE is mindful of commitments made to the Oireachtas to examine these matters with a comprehensive, accurate and complete presentation of the facts, including details of transactions on the barter

account, and we are working intensively to prepare for further engagements and publication. We will not be discussing any specific transactions on the account while the preparation of that material is in progress.

"The circumstances that led to the understatement of Ryan Tubridy's earnings from 2017-19 period are being reviewed separately by Grant Thornton. As soon as that review is completed, a further statement shall be made by RTE as appropriate."

Renault has previously said that it does not comment on commercial deals. @johnmooneyRIL; @beaudonnelly

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

A DAY OF MUTINY AND MAYHEM FOR PUTIN

News



IRELAND'S COCAINE EPIDEMIC



Revealed: how RTE channelled undeclared money to Tubridy

Public broadcaster told star's agent to provide invoice to London firm for €150,000

John Mooney and Beau Donnelly

RTE told Ryan Tubridy's agent to send a British media company invoices, labelled as "consultancy services", which the broadcaster used for €150,000 in top-up salary payments to its star presenter.

Dee Forbes, RTE's director-general, discussed the payments with Tubridy's agent, Noel Kelly, days before an arrangement was put in place to route money from the state-funded public broadcaster to the presenter.

Today's disclosure by The Sunday Times sheds light on how the station understated Tubridy's remuneration package.

The payments were organised by RTE, which arranged for the creation of the invoices, which were labelled as consultancy services, before being settled by the British media firm Astus last year.

Tubridy's name was not mentioned on any paperwork or payments.

RTE and Astus maintained a barter relationship where services were exchanged and traded. The London firm is said to have acted in good faith at all times and there is no suggestion of any wrongdoing on its part, or on the part of either Kelly or Tubridy.

Kelly sent the invoices to RTE which forwarded them to Astus to process the payments at an overall cost to RTE's barter account of €230,760, according to sources with knowledge of the affair.

The €150,000 was in lieu of two annual sums originally intended to be paid by Renault, which previously sponsored *The Late Late Show* but which did not renew an agreement that was underwritten by RTE.

The consultancy invoices covered top-up payments of €75,000 for the years 2021 and 2022 but made no reference to Tubridy or his company Tuttle Productions. "There was an explicit instruction by RTE to anonymise the transactions and use no names," The Sunday Times was told yesterday.

Kelly was told by RTE not to mention any names on the invoices, which were generated on behalf of CMS Marketing, a company he controls. The money was paid into a bank account at AIB in Westmoreland Street, Dublin, controlled by Kelly's company and for his client, Tubridy.

The two payments made to the presenter, which totalled €150,000, were part of the €345,000 in earnings that RTE understated Tubridy had made over the past six years.

An investigation is under way to establish how a further €120,000 in salary to Tubridy between 2017 and 2019 was understated by RTE.

RTE had been enforcing a policy of salary reductions and redundancies. Forbes had also given evidence to the Oireachtas public accounts committee on how it was curtailing unnecessary



BRYAN MEADE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Ryan Tubridy's name was not on any paperwork. There is no suggestion of wrongdoing on his part

spending. RTE suspended Forbes last Wednesday, the day before it issued a public statement acknowledging that it had misreported Tubridy's remuneration over successive years.

Catherine Murphy, the deputy chairwoman of the public accounts committee, last night described the payment arrangement as outrageous.

"When you don't have transparency, this is what happens. This appears to be a web which is slowly unravelling. There is no legitimate reason why anyone would create invoices for consultancy services to pay Ryan Tubridy via a London firm."

"This sort of thing should simply not happen as public funds are involved," she said. "We need to know why RTE's internal financial controls did not pick this up."

The disclosure that Tubridy received hundreds of thousands of euros in additional payments in 2017-22 sent shockwaves through the broadcaster last week.

Kelly and Tubridy did not respond to questions from The Sunday Times.

Tubridy initially said that RTE's accounting treatment of payments made to him were a matter for the broadcaster but last Friday he apologised for not correcting the public record when RTE published what it believed to be his salary. His future at RTE is unclear.

RTE yesterday promised there would be "appropriate accountability" though it confirmed it had not interviewed Tubridy about his knowledge of the matter. "There will be appropriate accountability for what has occurred. There are processes in train and RTE needs to be mindful of the legal considerations and the rights

of individuals and affording them due process," it said.

The statement followed the announcement by Catherine Martin, the media minister, of an external review of corporate governance and culture at the station.

However, the Sunday Times has learnt that the public accounts committee fears RTE will use the establishment of an external review as an excuse not to appear or fully disclose what it has found in its audit.

Kelly and his companies represent other presenters including Claire Byrne, Joe Duffy, Dave Fanning and Donncha O'Callaghan, as well as Newstalk's Pat Kenny and Ciara Kelly, Today FM's Matt Cooper, the BBC's Caitriona Perry and architect Dermot Bannon. There is no evidence to suggest any other clients of Kelly's received secret payments.

Martin said yesterday she did not know why Forbes had been suspended, stating the suspension was "due to a disciplinary process. I can't prejudice that".

When asked whether she had confidence in the executive board of RTE she said: "They have moved swiftly on this issue, I am confident of that. Nevertheless there needs to be an absolute external review. I've consulted with the leaders and I have told them that this is what I feel is needed. And they have given agreement to that."

A thorn in Montrose, pages 4-5



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A THORN IN

RTE faces a Dail grilling over ‘under the radar’ payments made to Ryan Tubridy. *John Mooney and Beau Donnelly reveal how the money was moved to the star*

Noel Kelly wanted his client to get paid. It was January 2022 and the founder and chief executive of NK Management – a talent agency that represents some of RTE’s best-known presenters – had for months been chasing the public broadcaster for money it owed his star performer, Ryan Tubridy.

RTE had agreed to underwrite an annual payment of €75,000 to Tubridy, which was intended to come from its commercial partner, Renault. The payment was a top-up to Tubridy’s annual salary of €440,000.

The presenter of *The Late Late Show*

received the first instalment in 2020, but the car manufacturer did not renew the agreement the following year as the economy was faltering during the pandemic.

Kelly had repeatedly asked RTE to make up the difference, which was guaranteed in Tubridy’s contract, and wrote to the station’s director-general, Dee Forbes, seeking the payments owed to his client. More correspondence followed when Forbes and RTE failed to respond, according to several sources. Eventually, Forbes did reply and arranged to talk directly to Kelly in late April.

What was agreed between them has rocked the national broadcaster to its core and caused “untold damage” to its reputation. Forbes was suspended last

Wednesday pending an internal investigation into a scheme designed to funnel “under-the-radar” payments to Tubridy, while the broadcaster has been summoned to appear before the Dail’s public accounts committee to explain itself. Catherine Martin, the media and arts minister, yesterday ordered an external review of governance and culture at the broadcaster following a meeting with Siún Ni Raghallaigh, who chairs the RTE board.

“The purpose of this review will be to determine what fundamental or systemic issues need to be addressed, including the adequacy of internal controls,” she said. “Public trust in RTE must be rebuilt. Therefore, a government decision on the

future funding model for public service broadcasting has been paused until such time as this review is complete and the findings considered.”

The controversy centres on how two secret payments worth a total of €150,000 were made to Tubridy via CMS Marketing, a firm controlled by Kelly.

The payments were not treated in a normal fashion by RTE. Instead Kelly was instructed to create invoices which covered the years 2021 and 2022. The invoices, Kelly was told, were not to be made out to RTE but addressed to Astus, a London media company.

Kelly did as requested and generated two invoices for €75,000 each on behalf of CMS Marketing, on different dates, and sent them to RTE. The invoices were given codes 11416 and 11526. They stipulated that the monies were to be paid into an AIB account controlled by CMS. RTE forwarded the invoices to the London firm.

Astus operated a bartering system, whereby it would pay invoices supplied by RTE and its commercial division in return for advertising space and other services. The company often paid for entertainment and hospitality events invoiced by the national broadcaster.

Both payments to Tubridy went through RTE’s barter account, a facility commonly used in the advertising sector to trade goods and services through an intermediary. Astus acted at all times in good faith and there is also no suggestion

Dee Forbes has been suspended as director-general of RTE over the payments to Ryan Tubridy

“**RTE initially assumed Astus made a mistake but could not get a clear answer internally**”

of any wrongdoing on the part of either Kelly or Tubridy.

Put plainly, Tubridy was paid €150,000 but the actual cost to RTE was €230,760, inclusive of fees incurred through the barter account process, the board said last week. Tubridy’s name was not included on the paperwork as per RTE’s instructions to Kelly.

Suspensions were aroused almost immediately inside RTE. In May 2022, Astus sent RTE a statement that referred to one of the payments marked “consultancy services”.

RTE initially assumed Astus had made a mistake but it could not get a clear answer internally from those involved in facilitating the payments, according to sources familiar with the events.

More questions soon followed but these too went unanswered. No one seemed to be able to explain what services Astus was paying for or who had authorised the payments. A number of people at the broadcaster were alerted to the matter over the following weeks.

The Astus barter account did not normally contain large payments. Later in July, RTE was asked to account for all expenditure on the Astus account as it needed to be recorded properly.

The two payments triggered more concerns when they were discovered, this time during an audit of RTE’s accounts in late March, prompting the broadcaster to appoint Grant Thornton to review its finances.

It is probable that someone within the



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JUNE 2021- JANUARY 2022

NK Management seeks payments from RTE for Tubridy as per his contract. The payments were in lieu of payments originally agreed with Renault, which previously sponsored *The Late Late Show*

APRIL 2022

RTE director general Dee Forbes agrees to a meeting with Noel Kelly. Days later, RTE instructs Kelly to create invoices made out to Astus but not to mention specific names

MAY & JULY 2022

Two CMS Marketing invoices for “consultancy fees” are sent from RTE to Astus. The invoices are dated May 9 and July 6 and cover payments for 2021 and 2022. Tubridy’s name is not mentioned. Tubridy receives two payments in 2022, totalling €150,000

JULY 2022

RTE’s commercial financial team questions who authorised the first payment through Astus and is told approval came from the director general

MARCH 2023

Audit of RTE’s 2022 accounts identifies a transparency issue in relation to payments

JUNE 2023

RTE board reveals Tubridy’s payments were understated over six years, totalling more than €300,000. Forbes is suspended

	Published	Actual
2017	€491,667	€511,667
2018	495,000	545,000
2019	495,000	545,000
2020	466,250	522,500
2021	440,000	515,000
2022	440,000	515,000

INVOICE		CPS	CPS
To Astus for consultancy services	May 9		July 6
Total	€75,000	€75,000	

SAM BOAL; LIAM MCBURNEY/PA

MONTROSE

broadcaster brought the payments to the attention of the auditors, having failed to get answers about their provenance.

RTE is now facing a crisis like never before. Last Thursday afternoon, its board published figures showing that the broadcaster had understated Tubridy's remuneration over six years by a total of €345,000. Investigations are under way to establish how this occurred.

Tubridy quickly issued a holding statement saying he was "surprised" by the disclosure, adding that it was RTE's error alone and therefore not something he could shed any light on.

"I just want to be clear: this is a matter for RTE and I have no involvement in RTE's internal accounting treatment or RTE's public declarations in connection with such payments," he said.

NK Management put out a similarly worded defence, declaring that everything was above board on its side and laying the blame squarely at RTE's door.

"There is no issue whatsoever in relation to the payments being properly and lawfully due and there is no suggestion of

“I just want to be clear: this is a matter for RTE and I have no involvement in its internal accounting

any wrongdoing on the part of Ryan Tubridy or NK Management," it said.

The controversy quickly ignited as to who orchestrated and signed off on the deal in RTE, and why no one at the national broadcaster – including Tubridy – corrected the public record when the station repeatedly published the wrong figures relating to his annual income.

Last Friday, after Tubridy was absent from his radio show amid mounting questions about his earnings, NK Management released a second statement on the presenter's behalf. He said that he should have "asked questions" when incorrect figures were published by his employer.

"I didn't, and I bear responsibility for my failure to do so. For this, I apologise unreservedly," said Tubridy, who will not return to his prime-time radio spot this week.

Tubridy added that all his RTE earnings had been included in his company's accounts filed with

Noe Kelly put pressure on the national broadcaster to maintain the payments to his client that previously came via Renault as the sponsor of The Late Late Show

the Companies Registration Office, and that his taxes were up to date.

Kelly and Tubridy declined to answer questions yesterday. Forbes could not be reached.

Asked yesterday whether the payments routed to Tubridy's agent via London complied with RTE's accounting processes and what action was taken when questions were first raised, a spokeswoman for the broadcaster said: "As per the statement issued by the RTE board on Thursday, in late March of this year during a routine audit of RTE's 2022 accounts, an issue was identified in relation to the transparency of certain payments.

"On receipt of this information, the audit and risk committee of the RTE board promptly commissioned Grant Thornton to carry out an independent fact-finding review on the matter in question. Mr Tubridy received two payments of €75,000 (totalling €150,000), each in 2022 (being a payment for 2021 and a payment for 2022). It was these payments that prompted the review by Grant Thornton."

Ni Raghallaigh, the chairwoman of the RTE board, said yesterday that its priority was to ensure that public trust in corporate governance at RTE was restored.

"We take this responsibility very seriously," she said. "We will work closely with the forthcoming external review to ensure that these issues are rigorously examined, so that full confidence in Ireland's independent, public service broadcaster can be rebuilt."

Renault, when asked whether its sponsorship of *The Late Late Show* would continue, said: "Renault Ireland don't comment on any commercial agreements."

Alison O'Connor, page 20

Watt muscled in to halt sponsor deal with hit fitness show

Ken Foxe

The country's most controversial civil servant intervened to end his department's sponsorship of the hit RTE show *Operation Transformation*.

The Department of Health had been paying about €283,000 a year to sponsor the programme through its Healthy Ireland initiative but the arrangement was brought to an abrupt end last year.

Internal records reveal that Robert Watt – the secretary-general involved in the much criticised proposed secondment of former chief medical officer Tony Holohan to Trinity College Dublin – had "severe reservations" about sponsoring the programme last year.

He signed off on the deal with a "heavy heart", according to records released under freedom of information law.

Watt's involvement began in late 2021 when he sought additional information on the rationale for the sponsorship. The country's best-paid civil servant – earning €292,000 a year, which is more than the annual sponsorship of the RTE show – was given an overview by a senior civil servant. "As discussed, supplementary e-submission for review and approval please," it said.

Watt signed off on it, saying: "Approved – with a heavy heart!! But we need to review next year. Thank you, Robert."

An email later sent by the secretary-general from December 2021 reiterated his point: "This is the last year!"

His colleague, a principal officer in the department, responded: "Thanks for this, noted re: the heavy heart!"

In October last year, RTE

contacted the Department of Health to say that while it understood sponsorship was no longer an option, it was wondering whether Healthy Ireland would still support the programme's initiative.

An internal department email explained how the taxpayer came to sponsor the show, to the tune of between €270,000 and €283,000 each year. The arrangement originally stemmed from the government's Keep Well resilience campaign during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It had required "significant work" for the Healthy Ireland co-ordinator while *Operation Transformation* was being filmed, the email said.

There was also a great deal of work involved in the weekly engagements with RTE and ensuring experts provided "snippet" videos for social media.

The email said: "The Sec Gen [secretary-general] made it clear that he didn't support continuing the sponsorship into 2023. We informed RTE that we wouldn't be renewing the sponsorship."

Internal records also detail how the department sought to rebut suggestions that the sponsorship deal had ended due to a "backlash from eating disorder groups".

The programme, which follows people trying to lose weight and improve their fitness with expert guidance, has attracted some criticism, with some saying that it can be "triggering" for those who have had eating disorders.

The Department of Health denied that the decision was affected by any backlash.

Asked why Watt was opposed to extending the sponsorship, the department said that it had no comment to make.

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