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Dáil Éireann Debate

Unrevised

Leaders' Questions (Continued)

Wednesday, 26 October 2016

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:   I want to bring to the attention of the Taoiseach and, in particular, the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, the report published in 2011 entitled, Time to Move On from Congregated Settings. This was a strategy for community inclusion. I agree that there are people in institutions who should not be there and who should be integrated into our community. However, there were 72 institutions which were, in fact, living breathing communities. The example I give today is St. Mary of the Angels in Beaufort, County Kerry, which provides an excellent service, as did the other 71 centres. In Kerry, we also had Glebe Lodge in Castleisland and Kerry Cheshire Home in Killarney. My problem with the report is that it is closing these facilities down. These facilities were centres of excellence for dealing with people with intellectual and physical disabilities. I refer to people who have profound disabilities and who are incapable of living in communities. Their parents and carers realise this but the institutions are no longer taking in new residents with these disabilities. What is the answer for the young parents of today who have children for whom they are not able to cater at home? There is no place for them to go while we are closing down centres of excellence.

Deputy Finian McGrath:   That is not true.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:   There is confusion.

Deputy Finian McGrath:   There is no confusion.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:   In yesterday's *Irish Examiner*, Claire O'Sullivan reported that the manager of St. Mary of the Angels said it is not closing. However, the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, said the HSE had met public representatives and was clear in stating that St. Mary of the Angels will close over time. My problem is that we do not want it to close. It is doing excellent work. With 4,000 people living in the 72 communities covered by the report, it is proposed to ensure that there will be no further admissions and no further need for congregated

settings. If nobody is being taken in, that is, in effect, to close every one of those facilities down. What is going to happen to young people who need somewhere to go because they cannot be kept at home? I want the Taoiseach and the Minister of State to come to Kerry to look at St. Mary of the Angels as an example of the service being provided to these people. I ask them to then go on a forum like Radio Kerry to explain to mothers, fathers and relatives why these people are going to see their excellent facilities closed down. I appreciate that when the report was compiled, it was done in good faith and with good reason. However, the message here is that one shoe does not fit all sizes. This is a retrograde step.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Healy-Rae for his question. The Time to Move On from Congregated Settings report found that there were a number of people still experiencing institutional living conditions which were not right in this day and age. Good progress has been made. In 2008, 4,000 people resided in congregated settings whereas in September 2014, that number was approximately 3,200. Today, the figure is under 2,225. The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, announced funding of €20 million in June for the HSE to move people out of congregated settings and that funding will be used to relocate approximately 165 people living in 14 institutions nationally.



The focus here has to be on the person concerned, as Deputy Healy-Rae is well aware. With regard to St. Mary of the Angels, it is important to say that there is no imminent closure involved here. The HSE is consulting with the families and local communities to find the best solution for each individual. I understand that the St. John of God services have acknowledged that communications could and should have been better in this regard so that everybody knew what was involved. It is important, however, to point out that it is the policy of Government and the HSE to move on from congregated settings in the best interests of individuals and to do so in a planned and phased manner.

On 18 September, a family forum meeting took place. Discussions were held around HIQA inspections and decongregation and concerns were raised. Many family members were concerned that their relatives would not be suitable for community living. Some attendees said not enough information was given to them around the decongregation policy. Assurances were given that this was being done on a phased basis through the use of what was termed "community transition plans" and that it would only apply if it improved the quality of life of the individual. It

was agreed that a family representative group would be set up and a meeting arranged with the senior management of the St. John of God services in Kerry. On 28 September, family members of all service users on the campus were contacted on an individual basis and reassurance was provided to them that they would be consulted fully and involved in any changes relating to their family members currently living in St. Mary of the Angels.

On 5 October, representatives of St. John of God services and the HSE disability services met the family representative group to discuss the concerns that had been outlined by family members. Representatives also met public representatives on 17 October to brief the group on the time to move out of conjugated settings. Notwithstanding these actions, St. John of God said that there were deficiencies.

There are currently 77 adults with intellectual disabilities residing on the campus. Of these, 17 are accommodated in an old-style ward. It is not suitable in this day and age and does not meet national standards for residential accommodation. It is understood that they will not be the first people to move out, but that they may move to more suitable accommodation within the campus. The Deputy can take it that there will be far more discussion and engagement with everybody before anything is done in respect of any individual.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:   I thank the Taoiseach. While he said the closure of St. Mary of the Angels is not imminent, he has not said it will not close. The truth is that if people are no longer being taken in, by natural progression through death and the passage of time the buildings will become empty and the service will not continue to do what it has done in the past, namely, provide excellent care. Where are these people supposed to go?

Living in what the Taoiseach calls communities outside of congregated settings is not suitable for all people. The Taoiseach knows in his own constituency that there are young people with profound disabilities who are incapable of having suitable accommodation provided for them in a village, town or other setting. They need to be in what I would call a centre of excellence. I want it to be recognised that the 72 centres or homes - call them whatever one likes - and the carers, managers and workers in these facilities has given excellent care over the years. We are now breaking that system up. Why are we doing that?

We are taking for granted that this report is excellent, right and perfect. It is not. It is not addressing the problems people in the future who will have profound physical and mental disabilities will face. We need to have a proper place for them to go to. We are breaking up that system for no good reason.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Healy-Rae will appreciate that we have moved beyond the point where everybody might be institutionalised in these kinds of settings. That is not to decry the service given by the staff in settings over the years. There have been difficulties in some institutions, including one notable case in the West some time ago.

There are people are currently living in institutions like this who can benefit from moving back into their communities where services are provided for them. As the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, has pointed out, there are some places in Dublin where staff have moved with them. The change and quality of life is much better for those people.

I assure the Deputy that every one of the individuals in the institution has a caseworker. Nothing will be done without full consultation. As every public representative knows, when very good home care packages are provided, irrespective of the scale of challenge a person faces, it is better for people to be with their own families, in their own communities, and have services provided for them.

Some people have an extreme range of issues and some may find accommodation on the existing campus. As I said, there is no immediate or imminent closure of this institution. There will be proper, full and thorough consultation in the interests of each of the individuals concerned before any decision is made.