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Finian McGrath rejects pleas to keep facility for disabled people open

Friday, January 13, 2017

Anne Lucey in Killarney

Moving an adult with an intellectual disability out of congregated settings “works for the vast majority of people” says minister of state with responsibility for disability, Finian McGrath, who added he is very much committed to the policy.



He was speaking after a tour of a 76-bed-facility near Killarney, Co Kerry, where a high-profile campaign has been running to keep it open. However, Mr McGrath has rejected the call.

Some counties are ahead of the curve and all of their persons with intellectual disability are in small settings which give people more independence and more freedom — while still having the necessary support structure, Mr McGrath said.

“My objective is that within two years’ time every child with a disability in the State will have a service from the cradle to the grave,” the minister noted.

Mr McGrath was speaking after a visit to the St Mary of the Angels’ high-support facility for profoundly disabled persons at Beaufort where relatives and politicians have been campaigning to retain it and enhance it.

The farm was donated to a religious order 50 years ago to serve people with disabilities. Several public meetings in Killorglin on the issue have been held, and family members of residents say they object to the description of the facility set in a rural farm as an “institution” — they say it is very much a home to their loved ones.

Controversy erupted last November after it emerged residents' names had been put on the county council waiting list, without the families' knowledge.

Politicians including local councillors and TD Danny Healy-Rae are looking for a commitment from the minister and the HSE to keep St Mary of the Angels open and to build new bungalows in the facility on a large farm in the MacGillycuddy's Reeks foothills.

No new residents have been taken into Beaufort, Mr Healy-Rae pointed out: "Sadly all children will not be born perfect and there is no setting in the world like this and it should be retained."

However, Mr McGrath rejected the call, saying that while he understands the concerns, he is not going to keep St Mary of the Angels open as it is, because he is deeply committed to the policy of decongregation which gives people greater flexibility. He has met with staff, families, as well as residents and has made his position clear.

While no resident will be moved without their family's knowledge and consultation, no new residents will be taken in, Mr McGrath said.

A number of people will be moving out shortly, by agreement.

Two years ago some 4,000 adults with intellectual disabilities were housed in congregated settings. Now there are 2,730.

While a maximum of four bungalows in the Beaufort setting will be used and retained for local people, the objective is to move most people into small grouped housing in the community.

The HSE and St John of Gods managers, apologised after many residents' names were placed on a council housing list without the families' knowledge. Many of the residents are in their 40s and have lived there for most of their lives.

Singer Daniel O'Donnell has backed the high-profile campaign to keep it open. Mr McGrath also announced the setting up of a committee to liaise with parents and relatives.