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'Too early for long-term St Mary plan' - St John of God

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Families of residents earmarked for relocation from their home at St Mary of the Angels are considering legal action in a desperate bid to prevent their loved ones being moved into houses in towns and villages across Kerry.

The controversial move to relocate residents of the Beaufort centre is descending into a bitter feud pitting families against the St John of God care providers and the HSE overseeing the national policy of closing 'congregated' settings.

Under that policy residents of so-called 'congregated' settings are to be moved into a 'community setting', ie individual houses in estates in towns and village.

St John of God CEO Clare Dempsey told The Kerryman in a statement issued on Tuesday that 'St Mary of the Angels is not closing' however and said it is 'premature' to discuss the long-term plan for the Beaufort site.

However, the statement said the charity is 'committed to facilitating residents to transition to community living over a

period of time' - but only in consultation with the residents and their families.

Families fear any such move would be devastating for their profoundly disabled loved ones. South Kerry woman Ina O'Dwyer said the move would be 'distressing' for her 40-year-old son Bernard, resident in St Mary's since the age of 5, in a letter to The Kerryman this week.

Ms O'Dwyer was informed her son would be moving to a house in Milltown under the plan in a move that completely blindsided the family.

Bernard's father Jack Fitzpatrick told The Kerryman this week that affected families are now considering seeking legal advice - chiefly over a claim that residents' names were put onto the local housing list 'without the authority of families'.

Anne Hannan, whose 47-year-old brother Johnny has been resident in St Mary's since 1974 said her family cannot make any sense of the move: "We cannot fathom a decision taken in some far away office to disrupt this tranquil life his severe autism prevents him from having anywhere else."

Minister for Disabilities Finian McGrath told media this week that he is fully behind the national 'decongregation' policy that would see residents moved out into the community, however.

Any such move would not happen overnight, but over a period of time and only in full consultation with families, he said.

The HSE moved also this week to assure families they would be fully consulted with as plans take effect into the future (see below). It described the proposed changes as in line with 'similar positive changes...across the country and supporting the move to community living.'

Two units at St Mary's are earmarked for immediate closure, as part of a national pilot scheme under the HSE policy - St Brendan's and St Fidelis's.

Talk of consultation is being met with scorn among families who say they only found out about the move to relocate residents when Jack Fitzpatrick raised the issue at what was a routine meeting with St Mary of the Angels' management recently.

"Towards the end of this meeting I asked what long term plans

there were for the complex. This question was not expected and we were gradually informed that plans were in place to move everybody off the property in line with national policy," Mr Fitzpatrick told The Kerryman.

Ms Dempsey's statement suggests this is not the case, but refers to a commitment on 'transition' for each resident: "This transition will take place in consultation with the person and their families over a phased period and will be based on the person's needs, wishes and preferences. We are committed to working with each resident, and their family to achieve the best outcomes for and with each person."

Meanwhile, the Principal for St Francis's Special School on the same campus, Liam Twomey, said he is fully satisfied the school will not be affected.

Kerryman