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Minister to meet St Mary's families

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Minister for Disabilities Finian McGrath will meet with representatives of families of St Mary of the Angels (SMOA) residents during a visit to the centre next month in a move broadly welcomed by relatives.

News of the looming visit was announced in a letter to Fine Gael Kerry Deputy Brendan Griffin from Minister McGrath's private secretary during the week in which the reasons behind the national 'decongregation' policy were discussed at length.

Chairperson of the St Mary's Relatives' Association Jack Fitzpatrick said he welcomed the opportunity to meet with Minister McGrath and would present him with a set of proposals setting out what he described as an 'alternative' plan for the future of the famous centre he believes would help it thrive into the future.

However, the letter received by Deputy Griffin suggests a specific, phased time frame for the closure of 'institutional' settings nationwide and it makes clear that St Mary of the Angels cannot be exempted from the so-called 'Time to Move On' policy.

"The Minister wants to make it very clear that there is no plan for imminent closure of St. Mary of the Angel's. One of the key recommendations of the Report is a seven year phased closure of congregated type settings with individuals actively supported to live full inclusive lives at the heart of the family community and society," Minister McGrath's private secretary Adrian McLaughlin wrote Deputy Griffin.

The letter also sets out the rationale behind the policy - which was drafted on the back of a report completed in 2011 by a specially-appointed working group.

"The Report outlines how it was found that there were a significant number of people still experiencing institutional living conditions where they lacked basic privacy and dignity, and lived their lives separated from any engagement with their local community or family. Clear international evidence has shown that this is not the best way to be sure that people with a disability are living the best life possible for them, where they can achieve their own, individual full potential," Mr McLoughlin wrote. Mr McLaughlin emphasised that no resident would be moved out against their or their family's wishes.

Mr Fitzpatrick welcomed the visit: "We are very pleased that the Minister has set aside the time to come to see St Mary of the Angels and experience firsthand the lives of the people who call it their home, and hear firsthand our proposals towards an

alternative way forward that we believe would work." Mr Fitzpatrick said his group was not yet in a position to publicise details of the proposals.

Kerryman