

Special needs children to be hurt badly by budget cuts

By Donal O'Reilly

ORGANISATIONS in Kerry helping those with special needs may be forced to reduce their services as a result of a lack of funding from the Government, it was claimed this week.

Sister Colm, Chief Executive Officer of St Mary of the Angels in Beaufort, told *The Kerryman* that the organisation was already underfunded even before the last budget — which made no provision for funding for any new service developments — and pointed out that it would require at least €300,000 in capital and €200,000 in revenue for the body to be able to provide the same standard of care as before.

"The cutbacks will have a lot of very serious effects for our centre," Sister Colm said. "For example, as things stand, we won't be able to provide day placements for any school leavers, and our respite service, which a lot of parents and carers rely very heavily on, will have to be severely curtailed."

In addition, the support service which St Mary's provides to the Nano Nagle School in Listowel, under which physiotherapy is offered, will not be available after June unless a fresh injection of funds can be sourced.

"We need a substantial allocation of funds from somewhere or else we'll be left with no choice but to reduce the very important services we offer. Of course, it's not just us — every similar organisation in the country is in the same boat," Sister Colm said.

The position is little different for the Kerry Parents and Friends Association, whose chief executive, Tony Darmody, said that the services likely to be affected include the ability to respond to requests for emergency placement and the relocation of residents of St Finian's Hospital in Killarney who have been chosen to stay in residential accommodation in the community.

"We have already been underfunded for many years and, in the absence of any additional funding to address these serious deficits, there is a real threat to existing service and employment within the Association," Mr Darmody pointed out.

The matter is a national disgrace, according to North Kerry TD Jimmy Deenihan, who said that bodies such as St Mary of the Angels and the Kerry

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Parents and Friends Association are being forced to prepare for the next 12 months in the face of what he called continuing budget cutbacks.

"The situation will reach critical proportions this summer when neither training places nor sheltered employment or even day care places will

be available for disabled children leaving educational units at 18 years of age," the Fine Gael TD said.

"If non-disabled school leavers faced such a situation it would be regarded as a national crisis, yet the Government appears happy to allow this to go unchecked."

The situation is particularly ironic in the year that Ireland hosts the Special Olympics, Deputy Deenihan suggested, adding that this contrast has not been lost on parents and other carers.

He went on, "Their energies are more than exhausted in the daily task of caring, and the

Government should not force them to take to the streets again simply to get basic services for our disabled."

Deputy Deenihan's concerns were echoed by the Sinn Féin TD for North Kerry Martin Ferris, who said that the Government's failure to fund new service develop-

ments has already had serious consequences.

"People with intellectual disabilities and their parents and carers are not responsible for the financial shortcomings of the current administration and should have to bear the brunt of any so-called adjustments," Deputy Ferris insisted.



Sr Colm Sheils, CEO St Mary of the Angels, Beaufort, with residents Daniel and Michelle, and staff Breda O'Sullivan, Rathmore (left) and Breda Lynch, Killarney. Pic: Kevin Coleman



Michelle, one of St Mary of the Angels' residents, with Sr Colm Sheils.