

FORMER CARE HOME RESIDENT NOW 'LIVING LIKE A PRISONER'

Councillors back families in fight for St Mary of the Angels

By DÓNAL NOLAN

A FORMER care home resident is now living 'like a prisoner' in a community house that is completely fenced off from the outside world after being relocated there under the HSE's policy of 'decongregating' care homes, it was claimed this week.

Chairperson of the Saint Mary of the Angels (SMOA) Parents' and Relatives' Association Jack Fitzpatrick cited the case on Monday in an impassioned plea to Kerry County Councillors for support.

"We've been told people who were moved into the community are thriving," he said.

"I saw the outside of the house where one of them is living. There is an eight to ten-foot wooden fence around the back garden. The sides and front of the house are guarded by a six-foot mesh fence and there's a big heavy metal gate. That person is living like a prisoner," Mr Fitzpatrick said in an address to the Council during a debate on the controversy.

"If that's community living, no thanks," he said.

Councillors moved to unanimously back families of SMOA residents in their fight to keep their loved ones in the Beaufort centre – the only real home many of the residents have known since moving as young children into the care of the Franciscan

Missionaries, who operated the centre until its transfer to St John of God in 2005.

The issue was described by one councillor as the 'single most important' one to have ever come before the chamber.

Cllr Norma Moriarty (FF) praised the services at SMOA. "There are so many things we have gotten wrong in this country. St Mary of the Angels is one we got absolutely right. We have to fight this and we have to be united. This is the single most important issue that has ever come before us," she said.

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Cllrs unanimous behind families

By **SIMON BROUDER & DÓNAL NOLAN**

MEMBERS of Kerry County Council have pledged to do everything in their power to help families of the St Mary of the Angels (SMOA) residents in their fight to stop their loved ones being moved out of the care centre in Beaufort under the HSE's national 'decongregation' policy.

The promise came after SMOA Parents and Relatives Association Chairperson Jack Fitzpatrick made an impassioned plea for help at the council's monthly meeting on Monday.

His voice cracking with emotion, Mr Fitzpatrick told the councillors about the conditions he said one former care home resident is living in since moving out under the HSE's 'Time to Move On' policy.

"We've been told people who were moved out into the community are thriving," he said.

"I saw the outside of the house where one of them is living. There is an eight to 10-foot wooden fence around the back garden.

"The sides and front of the house are guarded by a six-foot mesh fence and there's a big heavy metal gate. That person is living like a prisoner," said Mr Fitzpatrick.

"If that's community living, no thanks," he said.

After he spoke, councillor after councillor pledged to do all they can to help the families in their fight.

The councillors' contributions were emotional and it was impossible to doubt their sincerity.

One of the most powerful came from Fianna Fáil's Norma Moriarty who made a stirring call for unity.

"There are so many things we have gotten wrong in this country. St Mary of the Angels is one we got absolutely right. We have to fight this and we have to be united. This is the single most important issue that has ever come before us," she said.

Councillors were unanimous in their condemnation of the HSE.

Cllr Brendan Cronin said the HSE was speaking with "a forked tongue" while Cllr Johnny Healy-Rae slammed the "blackguards" behind the plan to move the residents.

Cllr Healy-Rae added he was aware of one case where a resident had been moved from the centre at a cost of €600,000, only to be returned a short time later when a new community living arrangement proved to be totally unsuitable.

In an unprecedented show of support, councillors stood in unison and gave a standing ovation to the families as they left the chamber.

Such a unanimous bipartisan spirit has rarely been seen in the council chamber.

This was typified by Sinn Féin's Toireasa Ferris who went out of her way to compliment Norma Moriarty for her contribution,



calling it one of the finest she had ever heard in the chamber.

The 14 SMOA family members who were in the chamber for the meeting said afterwards that they took great solace from the councillors' vow to help them.

St John of God management at SMOA insist the centre is not closing and say that no residents will be moved into community houses unless they and their families consent to such a move – only after lengthy consultation between management, families and residents on the matter.

Another key criteria management say must be met before a resident would be relocated is that such a move must be shown to represent an improvement in the resident's life and welfare.

But it would appear such assurances are not assuaging many families' fears. SMOA families are holding a public meeting in Killorglin's CYMS hall tonight (Wednesday) at 8pm to discuss their concerns.

Kerry Sinn Féin Deputy Martin Ferris is meanwhile now looking into the case of 'community living' – highlighted by Mr Fitzpatrick in his address to Council – which he raised with HSE managers in a meeting on Monday:

"SMOA is doing a tremendous service to our county.

"It is a top class facility. If families wish loved ones move out that's fine. But residents shouldn't be moved because of a policy that is ill-thought out."

at St Mary of the Angels



ABOVE: Parents, clutching photographs of their children who are resident at St Mary of the Angels in Beaufort, during Monday's protest at County Buildings in Tralee.

LEFT: Jack Fitzpatrick with an image of his son Bernard (40).

FAR LEFT: Pat and Eilish Perryman with a photo of their son Patrick (39).

Photos by Domnick Walsh

