

Taoiseach in Kerry: meets with parents



Front, Sheila Marie Fitzgerald, Nora Brosnan, Taoiseach Micheál Martin, Kevin Madigan and Minister Norma Foley. Back Nicholas O'Sullivan, Helena Cronin, Teresa Mallon, Ger O'Sullivan Jimmy Deenihan, Cllr Tommy Cahill, Michael Healy Rae TD, and Michael Cahill TD



Paul O'Connor presents Taoiseach Micheál Martin with Sliabh Luachra artwork at St Marys of the Angels Beaufort. Photo by Seamus Healy.

Taoiseach meets 'burnt out' parents fighting for more disability supports

Micheál Martin's visit to Francis Special School and St Mary of the Angels to hear from concerned parents

SINEAD KELLEHER

The Taoiseach has indicated strong support for proposed plans to expand services at the St Mary of the Angels facility for physical and intellectual disabilities in Kerry.

Parents pleaded with the head of Government for more support, including a centre of excellence for respite, on the mid-Kerry site.

Jean O'Sullivan, a parent of a child with profound disabilities, said parents had laid bare the stress families are under for the Taoiseach to see and the need for respite care for parents who are 'burnt out' and 'at breaking point'.

She said parents spoke with the Taoiseach about the need for more disability services at St Mary of the Angels, which was gifted by the Doyle family

to the people of Kerry for these very reasons.

The Beaufort campus should also provide a retirement home for adults with disabilities who need long-term care and cluster housing for those with disabilities like that provided for the elderly and Travellers, according to parents.

Mr Martin paid a special visit this week to two of Kerry's key disability services located at the site - St Francis Special School and neighbouring St Mary of the Angels - on the invitation of TD Michael Cahill who has been campaigning for supports services for Kerry parents.

"I was honoured to invite and bring An Taoiseach Micheál Mar-

tin to St Francis Special School and St Mary of the Angels on Wednesday afternoon.

"This was a truly historic occasion, marking the first-ever visit by a Taoiseach to either of these amazing facilities. The Taoiseach had the opportunity to meet with management, staff, residents and parents, to see the excellent facilities on the campus first-hand and, importantly, to hear directly about the challenges and concerns they face," said the Kerry TD.

"Most importantly, it was an opportunity to see the wide range of services already being delivered on site and to see the significant potential that exists to further develop respite and en-

hanced services for children and adults with profound disabilities."

Deputy Cahill and Cllr Tommy Cahill said they recognise the vital need for respite.

"In the context of future plans, both Tommy and I have called for a super respite centre of excellence for both adults and children and enhanced services for all those with profound disabilities on this amazing campus.

"There is huge potential here. I was pleased to bring the Taoiseach to see it for himself, meet the people involved and hear directly from those who know these services best. I hope today's visit will help build further momentum behind the development of these services and ensure that

the potential of this campus is fully recognised and supported."

Cllr Cahill said they will continue to work with the relevant agencies.

"This was a very significant day for St Francis Special School, St Mary's of the Angels and the wider community. The staff, management, residents, families and service users have worked tirelessly to provide and develop these services, and it was important that An Taoiseach had the opportunity to come here, see the facilities and listen to their experiences directly."

"We will continue to work with An Taoiseach, the relevant Government Departments, St John of Gods, St Francis Special School,





At St Francis Special School Beaufort last Wednesday Michael Healy Rae TD, Principal Colin McGillicuddy, Taoiseach Micheal Martin, Minister Norma Foley, Michael Cahill TD, Cllr Tommy Cahill, Carol Mannix and Cllr Ann O'Sullivan.

the HSE and all the relevant agencies to ensure that the potential identified today is followed through and that the needs of service users, families and staff remain firmly on the agenda."

Currently, a plan is being drawn up for the Kerry site, which is owned by St John of God's, with the aim of identifying how best to use the land.

Taoiseach Micheal Martin said that it was positive that there is a site for development in Kerry but we have to be mindful of how we expand campuses.

He said that, going forward, disability policy must look at all areas.

"I am conscious where you have land, where you have a site, the real question should be how do we evolve that and change that but also keep doing what its core mission has been yet in a more modern way.

"What is important in the allocation resources is that we create opportunities for newer services and that we balance between de-congregation and newer services," he said

He noted the Government had provided record funding for disability last year but admitted it is difficult to maintain this funding as public expenditure increases.

The Taoiseach also praised staff at both services. He visited the new modular buildings at St Francis Special School and spoke with Principal Colin McGillicuddy about the need for further investment to cater for the demand for their services.

Mr McGillicuddy said there are currently 73 pupils in the school, but they cannot provide a place for all those who need it. He noted it was a great day for the school to have the Taoiseach to visit and listen to them.

"We are highlighting the work that is going on and the potential for further progress. We are looking to expand by two classrooms which would allow for 12 extra students. We are looking for that to be resourced," he said.

"Demand for places in schools has grown...We haven't been able to give places to all those who apply which is disappointing...We would like to support everyone,"



Taoiseach Micheal Martin speaking with Principal of St. Francis Special School Colin McGillicuddy (right) also included Michael Cahill TD, Cllr Tommy Cahill and Minister Norma Foley at St Francis Special School Beaufort. Photo Seamus Healy.

Mr McGillicuddy added.

He also highlighted the need for multi-disciplinary support at the school, and the hope the Kerry school will be included in the nationwide roll-out of school therapists.

"I am delighted to be here to visit St Francis and St Mary of the Angels and to meet with staff and the team who do fantastic work," Mr Martin told The Kerryman.

The Taoiseach then visited St Mary of the Angels where two special presentations were made to Mr Martin by St John of God service users Tina Moore and Paul O'Connor.

A special presentation by St John of God's was then given to Mr Martin outlining the success of decongregation.

Nina Tangney outlined how positive this has been for her son.

Nora Butler from St John of God's outlined the need for further investment in disability services and the need to develop plans for the future.

However, parents noted that de-congregation was not suitable for everyone and that this varied depending on the level of disabilities.

Parent Jack Fitzpatrick told the Taoiseach that those with 'profound disabilities' are often forgotten about.

He said, as a member of the parents' association at St Mary of the Angels, they want to know "what way the future lies" for the campus, adding that this site must remain a place for those with disabilities.

He noted the need for a retirement home for those with profound disabilities so they don't end up in an unsuitable community hospital.

The Taoiseach noted that he came here to listen to those who avail of the services and said that disability was a priority for him across all Government Departments, including housing, with plans underway to ensure that a portion of local authority projects are allocated to disability.

He also said a lot of funding went to de-congregation, but that needs to be rebalanced now to look at residential and respite.



Tara Moran presents Taoiseach Micheal Martin with her painting of Clogher strand with from left Michael Healy Rae TD, Michael Cahill TD, Minister Norma Foley and Nora Brosnan at St Marys of the Angels Beaufort. Photo by Seamus Healy.