



# Department consigns children's charity build to the elements

By Finian Coghlan

THE Department of Justice (DoJ) is holding onto €4.8m of funds already promised to a clinic for paediatric therapies being built in Kildare town until the charity can tell them where it can come up with a further €4m to fit out the interior.

Bizarrely, the department has done so just weeks before the roof and windows were scheduled for installation – a process which would have at least weatherproofed the building.

The 1,579sqm (17,000sq ft) National Child Development Centre is under construction on Grey Abbey Road by Sensational Kids, a charity set up 16 years ago in Kildare Town Business Park by Newbridge native Karen Leigh after researching therapeutic aids for her son in the US.

"I was trying to navigate the lack of support for kids with additional needs – autism, Down Syndrome, ADHD, neurodivergent – it shouldn't need to be set up," she said.

When complete, the centre aims to support over 300 children per week, providing 13,000 therapy sessions annually – including occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, psychological assessments and play therapy – for children in need who are currently on lengthy waiting lists.

The decision to halt the construction work is due to the withholding of funding already approved by the department's Immigrant Investor

Programme (IIP).

This is a curious investment device aimed at people from outside the EU who wish to live, work or study in Ireland for two years, who have a net worth of at least €2m, and who then must donate at least €400,000 "for capital projects with social impacts" to do so.

"It's important to note that this is a private investor programme, and not government funds," said Karen.

Sensational Kids were then told by the IIP on 16 October that it would not release the remaining half of the €9.6 million previously committed to the project.

The reason given for this decision is a shortfall of an additional €4 million needed for the fit-out of the facility currently under construction due to rising costs.

The IIP states that it will not release funding until it has evidence of the €4 million needed to complete the fit-out of the project.

The charity has been in discussions with officials in relation to bridging this shortfall for a number of months, but to no great avail.

"What happened was we were delays, mainly with Covid, but the cost increases following the Ukrainian invasion didn't help, but we thought we could add investors," said Karen.

"This (IIP) programme was closed in February 2023, but we weren't concerned at the time because a Government press release said existing, approved programmes would

not be affected.

"Then, in February 2024 we were told we would not be allowed to add existing investors because the costs had increased, and there was now a €4m shortfall.

"We were left with this bill, hefty for a small children's charity, which is highly unfair, we thought.

"Obviously, as a small organisation to support children, we obviously didn't have €4m in the bank to do that. "It is so unfair, but we are committed to providing this facility for the children.

"Thousands of children across the country with additional needs who are in desperate need of therapy services are being put at risk with this sudden refusal to release committed funds for the construction of the National Child Development Centre".

The building started in April, and it was planned to have the roof and windows fitted by Christmas.

"That was the plan," said Karen. "But when we got the letter in October there were actually windows being manufactured off-site at the time, and literally truckloads of pre-cast concrete on the motorway that had to be turned around."

"A portion of that €4.8m would have weatherproofed it, but the DoJ have told us they're holding it, and won't release it until they have proof we have the other €4m for the fit-out.

"Stopping it now is just ad-

ding costs, and it'll cost us an estimated €200k to close and secure the site, and remove all the supplies and machinery.

"The builder has also pointed out that if we don't get back on site until next year he'd expect costs to go up again.

"This should never have happened. We are starting a GoFundMe page (target €1m), but we are calling on the HSE to make a €4m commitment so that the DoJ will release the €4.8m.

"We have to remember why we're doing this in the first place".

The National Child Development Centre is a cutting-edge facility being built on a 1Ha (2.4ac) greenfield site just off the M7 motorway.

Key features of the new centre when complete include 11 Therapy Rooms, 4 Sensory Motor Therapy Gyms, a Sensory Room, Therapeutic Kitchen, Training Rooms, Play, Develop & Learn Store, Therapeutic Playground, and Sensory Gardens.

Sensational Kids currently operates Child Development Centres in Kildare, Cork, Mayo, and Monaghan, and has directly supported over 10,000 children from all over Ireland through their child development centres. Sensational Kid's mission is to ensure that no child is left waiting for life-changing therapeutic support.

The DoJ has been asked to comment, but has not issued a statement at going to press.



Sensational Kids founder Karen Leigh at the construction site for the National Child Development Centre which has now ground to a halt