



Centre for children faces funding threat

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The development of a new charity-run centre to help children with additional needs is at risk after the Department of Justice announced it was withholding agreed funds for the project.

Sensational Kids, a charity that seeks to make therapy services accessible and affordable for children with additional needs, received approval for funding of €9.6 million to develop a new **National Child Development Centre** in Co Kildare through the Immigrant Investor Programme (IIP).

However, the programme, which was run through the Department of Justice, was closed with one day's notice in February 2023, with the Government stating that previously approved projects would be unaffected.

On October 16th last, officials within the IIP told Sensational Kids it was not releasing the remaining 50 per cent of funding committed to the scheme – €4.8 million – due to a €4 million shortfall for the total cost of the project. This additional funding is needed for the “fit out” of the facility once construction has been completed, the charity said.

Karen Leigh, chief executive and founder of Sensational Kids, said the financial deficit has arisen as they were told they were not permitted to update the costings of the project due to the closure of the IIP.

“The €4 million shortfall was a combination of things. Approval for funding was based on pre-planning drawings; the concrete levy added to the cost, and then inflation too. Just the different things that add to the costs,” she said.

However, Ms Leigh said the charity was in “discussions” with the HSE to bridge the funding gap. “We were confident we would be able to deliver it,” she said.

As a result of the IIP withholding 50 per cent of funding, the contractor left the site in mid-October and it has remained closed since. However, Ms Leigh said there are costs to maintain the site, as well as remobilisation costs

that will be incurred if or when construction resumes.

“The situation is particularly frustrating given there are thousands of children with additional needs from all around the country in desperate need of high-quality therapy and assessments,” Ms Leigh said.

“Sensational Kids itself already has more than 2,000 children waiting to avail of therapies at this new facility.”

Asked if the charity was considering legal action against the Department, Ms Leigh said they were “not ruling anything out”.

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The National Child Development Centre is a 17,000 sq ft building that seeks to support 300 children per week and provide 13,000 therapy sessions a year. It was due to reach substantial completion in April, with a further six months to be “fit out” before it opened to children at the end of 2025.

Key features of the completed project include 11 therapy rooms, four sensory motor therapy gyms, a sensory room, therapeutic kitchen, training rooms, and sensory gardens, among others.

The Department of Justice did not respond to a request for comment by the time of publication.