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## ANGRY REACTION TO SETTING UP OF ADDICTION CENTRE IN FALCARRAGH

April 6, 2014



Ballyconnell House in Falcarragh.

**News that Údarás na Gaeltachta is to sign off on a multi-million euro business deal involving the building of a Catholic-church run alcohol and drug addiction clinic near the main Falcarragh crossroads has met with an angry response.**

By Sean Hillen

Údarás officials, still recovering from the imminent closure of Largo Foods with the loss of 142 jobs after it had invested over 6.2 million euro in the company, say the proposed clinic to be housed in Ballyconnell House could provide much needed jobs in a town bereft of them.

"Ballyconnell House is historically a symbol of oppression, now it will be a symbol of healing, and it could provide as many as forty-five jobs," said John Curran, board member of Údarás and Fine Gael candidate for the area in the upcoming local council elections.

Others, however, voiced their anger that a Catholic Church controlled institution, Cuan Mhuire, would operate the facility, especially following the well-publicised cases of paedophilia by priests and other linked to church-run schools in the tightly-knit rural area.

Sensitivities were further aroused as national media reports emerged that two priests convicted of child sexual abuse stayed at other Cuan Mhuire centres in Ireland and were allowed to say Mass to recovering alcoholics there after their release from prison without their identities being revealed to patients.

In addition, a priest who was jailed after pleading guilty to nine counts of sexually abusing altar boys in a church sacristy, lived at one of the Cuan Mhuire centres, according to the reports. Cuan Mhuire has denied the allegations but has not opened its books for verification.

Martin Gallagher, from Falcarragh, a victim of clerical abuse who was interviewed in the BBC BAFTA-winning programme, "The Shame of the Catholic Church," is concerned.

"After the horrific things that have happened in this small area – with paedophiles linked to the Catholic Church, including Father Eugene Greene who pleaded guilty to 40 charges, as well as Michael Ferry, who studied religion at Maynooth and raped children at a church-run school in Derrybeg – there is understandable apprehension about anything the Catholic Church is involved in here," he said.

Gallagher pointed out that some cases of drug and alcohol addiction in west Donegal are "a direct result of Catholic Church-linked paedophilia," such is the trauma to the victims.

"How can that be handled sensitively by an addiction clinic run, in effect, by the Catholic Church?" he asked.

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Cuan Mhuire (Harbour of Mary) is a Christian group with direct ties to the Vatican and fees to it for its services would be paid either by private insurance or the HSE.

Asked whether he knew about the allegations against Cuan Mhuire, John Curran said, "I can't comment on the CM project due to the fact that the project is still at an exec level within the Udaras. I don't want to hinder this process as I don't know what stage the discussions are at and feel that the appropriate time for the Board to get involved is when we have a concrete proposal to hand."

Local people also questioned the need for a drug and alcohol addiction clinic when Donegal already has one, White Oaks in Muff.

While social workers report an increased problem with drug and alcohol addiction in Donegal, research has shown people who suffer such addictions rarely attend clinics in their own areas, particularly when the areas are rural, due to the stigma attached to such treatment. As such, few people in the immediate area of west Donegal would benefit from treatments provided.

Some people said the clinic's high cost would restrict available funding for cultural tourism projects for the Gaeltacht, something promised by new Údarás board members after taking office two years ago.

At a recent EU-backed CeangalG (ConnectG) conference on cultural tourism at An Chuir, Gearóid Ó Smaoláin, tourism officer for Údarás, said, "We've tried to develop Ballyconnell House for many years without success as no decent projects were put forward to us, so negotiations are well advanced for the clinic."

However, local businessman Milo Butler, who developed the 200-year-old hostelry in Gortahork 'Maggie Dan's' into a successful eating establishment, said he and other local entrepreneurs including a fluent, local Irish-language solicitor, put forward "a comprehensive business plan" to Údarás to turn the estate – on which the Cloughaneely Golf Club stands – into a hotel and tourism venture, including an equestrian centre.

"It is utterly ridiculous to say no decent projects have been put forward, especially at a time when this organisation says it wants to support the growth of tourism in the area," he said angrily. "Even worse, our proposal did not even receive so much as a response from Údarás, a simple professional courtesy in such circumstances."

Údarás officials said they did not know how many local people could be employed at the clinic or whether they would be part-time, low-skilled such as floor cleaners or higher-paid executive positions.

One Údarás officials said the organisation had paid the Catholic Church "millions of euro for Ballyconnell House some years ago" and that it now planned to offer it back at a "negligible or heavily discounted rental rate as part of an overall deal."

(Sean Hillen lives in Gaoth Dobhair and can be contacted at seanhillenblog.com)

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