

Open letter from the Minister for Justice and Equality Charlie Flanagan to the people of Kerry, in particular those of Cahersiveen.

I am writing this letter both to apologise and to explain. On behalf of Minister Stanton and myself, I want to apologise most sincerely to the people of Cahersiveen, for the way in which we had to open the Direct Provision Centre in the Skellig Star, but I also want to outline why we had to do it in the way we did. I hope you will allow me to do both.

I know that there has been upset and anger. I know there has been suspicion and worry. I can see why they built up and I really regret the extent to which our actions fuelled them. That is why I want to explain as much as I can, to outline the circumstances and timelines, and by doing so, hopefully to rebuild trust.

Opening Direct Provision centres can be difficult. Finding a way to balance confidential tender negotiations with local wishes for consultation is not easy, but as a Department we had been getting much better, once decisions on centres WERE made, at engaging with local representatives, communities and services, at informing them, reassuring them, and answering their questions.

But that was before any of us had ever heard of COVID-19.

In early March, my officials realised we needed new centres and we needed them quickly. It was not tenable in a health emergency, to have large numbers of international protection applicants in emergency hotel accommodation, sharing facilities with other guests. We needed more dedicated Centres where we could offer care and services, and the Skellig Star was one of three available centres identified from a previous expressions of interest process.

So we moved people in within days. It was fast. I admit that. It left little or no time for engagement. I admit that. It was presented as a fait accompli. I admit that too. All I can say in my Department's defence is we simply did not feel we had a choice.

We were facing an unprecedented health emergency and the Skellig Star was available to us.

But the speed of the operation had consequences. While we did provide information to local representatives, COVID brought with it the Health guidance that no visitors should come in to centres. That meant we were unable to offer community meetings, local people couldn't visit the premises to view the reconfiguration and amenities, there couldn't be meetings and chats with Centre staff, and there was no time for guidance on establishing a Friends of the Centre Group to foster bonds and friendships.

Instead there was a build-up of concern and worry. I want to acknowledge the extent to which that worry has been about the welfare of the residents and staff in the centre. I want to thank you for the concern you have shown. But I also want to outline some detail to put to rest any lingering doubt.

The new residents arrived in Cahersiveen on March 18th and 19th, some of them from a hotel in Dublin at which a case of COVID-19 was subsequently confirmed in an unrelated guest.

There have been suggestions that we knew of that case and recklessly allowed transfers to proceed despite it and despite the risk it posed to public health. I want to categorically deny that. My Department was never told of that case. The guest involved had only stayed at the hotel for one night when they fell ill. They were removed to hospital and their close contacts were asked by the HSE to self-isolate for 14 days as is the norm.

No one that we were accommodating in that hotel was approached as a traced contact, and there was no indication whatsoever that anyone we moved from that hotel was in any way unwell, was awaiting a test or a test result. In fact, and this I believe is a really crucial point, it was well over a fortnight (the incubation period) before any of our residents in Cahersiveen began to show symptoms or were

confirmed as positive for COVID 19. Furthermore the residents who first became symptomatic were not transferred from that hotel.

COVID-19 is a horrible disease. It is difficult to identify, and difficult to treat, while being shockingly easy to spread. That is why it is so hard to identify the source of any outbreak. All I can say about Cahersiveen however is that it is really difficult to look at the facts and the timeframe, and conclude that there was any link between that single case in the Dublin hotel and the residents in the Skellig Star becoming ill.

As to what the source of their illness was, well, we will almost certainly never know. That is the insidious nature of a community transmitted pandemic. We don't know where it comes from. We just know when it's here.

And now that it is here, Minister Stanton and I, along with our officials, are doing everything we can to deal with it.

Everyone who has tested positive has moved to a special self-isolation facility. There, many remain asymptomatic thankfully, while others who have developed symptoms are recovering well. Fortunately no one from any of our centres has as yet, been reported as being seriously affected.

Back in the Skellig Star however, one further case was confirmed more recently. That unfortunately meant the residents needed to complete another fortnight of self-isolation, which is now nearing an end. But when it does, the hotel and its residents will still be, as you and all of us are, in the middle of a pandemic. While, like you, they will be able to go out and about, they will still need to socially distance and they, like you, will still need to do everything they can to minimise risk to themselves and others. So they probably won't be able to establish themselves as full members of the Cahersiveen community for a while and you won't be able to visit just yet. But I hope when it's safe to do so that you will.

In the meantime, we are trying very hard to make life inside the Skellig Star as comfortable and safe as possible.

The centre, which is currently home to fewer than 70 people, has infection control measures in place and it has plentiful supplies of sanitising materials, masks and other PPE, as needed. A HSE Development Worker is onsite to monitor the residents' health while there is also good Wi-Fi. Outdoor space has been opened up and seating and exercise equipment have been set up.

As of now, meals and snacks are being provided, but our intention is for independent living arrangements with cooking facilities to be provided in the coming period. This is in line with our strategic plan for all centres

Recognising that the restrictions are especially difficult for children, toys, puzzles, tablets and laptops have been provided while the Tusla official seconded to work with my Department has also contacted the families.

To ensure we are communicating directly with our residents, my officials have begun virtual clinics and we are also working with an established NGO to put in place a residents' telephone support service.

We aren't doing this alone. I am very aware of the extent to which the people of Kerry wish the residents of the Skellig Star well and I want to thank those who have already provided support. In particular, I want to thank South Kerry Development Partnership for the arts and craft materials they have kindly donated, KASI (Killarney Immigrant Support Centre) for their engagement with residents, the Principals of the local schools who have prepared homework packs for the children and the people who have left donations and messages of support. I also want to acknowledge the people who turned out to welcome the residents on their arrival.

I know there is goodwill in Kerry towards those who come to our country seeking international protection. So can I say once again I hope we have not damaged it and I

hope you can accept that at all times our only priority has been to protect the health and wellbeing of residents, centre staff and the wider community.

In closing, I would like to thank the staff who have shown great dedication and loyalty and also to confirm that we are in a contractual arrangement for a 12 month period with the Skellig Star. The centre is operating and it will continue to do so. I just hope we can welcome you into it when the current restrictions are lifted. We are working very closely with the HSE and following their guidance to ensure this happens as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, thank you for your understanding.

Charlie Flanagan

Minister for Justice and Equality.