



Support: Emma and family with President Michael D Higgins and wife Sabina

EMMA MHC Mathuna always wanted lots of children. Growing up as an only child, she dreamt of having brothers and sisters to play with. Her childhood, although happy, was tinged with a loneliness that she filled with writing stories and playing with imaginary friends.

She had her first daughter, Natasha, when she was just 21. Four years later Seamus was born, a year after that she gave birth to another son, Mario. And he was followed by two more boys, Oisín, six, and two-year-old Donnacha.

Her dream of having a big family was certainly fulfilled. Yet given half a chance, the 37-year-old believes she would have had more.

'Oh I wanted more kids,' she insists. 'I became infertile because of the cervical cancer but I would have been the woman with the 14 kids, baking soda bread and raising chickens. I'm an only child and it's lonely. That's how I got into writing and using my imagination to cope with the loneliness.'

'But being an only child also made me resilient and that's where I got my strength from. You see my mam raised me on her own. Back in the 1980s being a single parent was not the done thing and she was working full-time... You needed to be tough.'

It's a week to the day since Emma learned from her GP that the cervical cancer she was diagnosed with in September 2016 had not only returned but had this time spread to her lungs. The doctor cried as she told the mother-of-five that this time there was nothing they could do. It was terminal.

She had been told only a few days earlier that she was one of the 209 women whose smear tests had been read incorrectly. And that a routine cervical check exam in 2013, which had come back clear, had in fact shown signs of abnormalities.

It's been a whirlwind seven days to say the least. Emma immediately decided to go public with her devastating diagnosis and threw herself into a media blitz of interviews and appearances. There was a heart-breaking interview on RTE Radio 1's Morning Ireland show, which was subsequently mentioned several times in the Dail.

And an appearance on The Late Late Show, where she received a spontaneous standing ovation from the audience. There were also several interviews with this newspaper, where she spoke about her anger at the HSE and the Government, who she believed were dragging their heels in dealing properly with the cervical cancer scandal.

At one point she asked that the President of Ireland intervene, saying he was the 'only person who could do something'.

Much to her surprise, a day or two later President Michael D Higgins told reporters that he planned to travel to Kerry to meet with Emma and offer his 'moral support'.

It's just a couple of hours since the President and his wife Sabina flew by helicopter into the tiny townland of Ballydavid in west Kerry to talk to Emma and her five children.

Reclining back into a large comfortable sofa in one of the sitting rooms of O'Gorman's guesthouse, where their meeting took place, Emma is struggling to digest what has just happened.

'All I seem to be saying over the last couple of weeks is: "I can't believe it," she says laughing. "I can't believe the cervical checks went wrong. I can't believe it was me, I can't believe I've had a biopsy, I can't believe I have cancer.'

'I can't believe the President has come to visit me — I can't keep up.'

Although noticeably tired, Emma is in remarkably good form. The presidential visit has meant a lot to her and her family, at a time when they are trying to come to terms with a prognosis that will leave her five young children without a mother.

Estranged from her husband, it's up to Emma to now try and sort out what will happen to her daughter and four sons once she is gone.

'I've a few things in place,' she says. 'I'll have to wait until next week before I can talk about it, but I've a really, really good idea in the pipeline. I'm just waiting to get things in place.'

'Everyone is worried about the kids, which is great. I'm determined to

by Jenny Friel

make everything positive and that they really will have a good life. And now they're friends with the President of Ireland, sure what more could you ask for?'

Emma's tendency to throw in a joke or two while discussing her heart-breaking predicament has been striking over the last week. For instance, on The Late Late she revealed that the gynaecologist dealing with her case was very handsome.

'Oh the sexy gynaecologist rang me this week to let me know when my PET scan is,' she says. 'And I said to him: "Do you know the amount of women outside my house looking for your number?"'

'It's always good to keep a sense of humour when you're going through something like this. Because if you don't, you start fretting and that's not good for your health.'

'It's acceptance. I believe that if I'm positive and happy and funny, and making a difference and making sure that my death is not meaningless, then the children will be okay.'

It all comes back to the kids. In between calling for accountability within the HSE, and for Cervical Check to be overhauled so that her situation cannot happen again, she has been taking care of Natasha, 15, Seamus, 11, Mario, 10, Oisín and Donnacha.

While her youngest son may not understand what is going on around him, she says he can 'sense something is up and is being very clingy'. The others are all dealing with it in their own different ways.

'I'm wrapping up doing interviews and media to focus on the children now,' she says. 'I needed to do the interviews to drill the message back

Everyone is worried about the kids, which is great

to Dublin. It had to be done, and I did that with my kids in mind.'

Have they minded all the attention?

'They love it,' she exclaims. 'It's comforting for them because they know they're not on their own and that's the best thing. As they say: it's secrets that keep us sick. By being so open about it, they talk about it with their friends, they're all in it together. You're better off telling them what's going on, otherwise they'll sense it.'

Born in Dublin, Emma's family lived on the northside for several years before her parents' marriage broke up and she moved to Leixlip, Co. Kildare, with her mother when she was eight years old. Her father subsequently moved to England, where he is still based and runs his own business.

'My parents were quite young when they got married,' she explains. 'My mam worked in the Department of Education, where she was a civil servant, so I went to school in Scoil Chaoimhin, which is on the grounds of the department, that's where I got my Irish.'

Before moving to Ballydavid, a Gaeltacht area that is about a 20-minute drive west from Dingle, at the end of last summer, Emma had been living in Edenderry, Co. Offaly, for seven years.

She had returned to college but after being diagnosed with cervical cancer in 2016, had to drop out to



She's the extraordinary mother whose courage in the face of her cervical cancer misdiagnosis moved the nation – and forced out the head of the HSE. Now, though, Emma Mhic Mhathuna is focusing on her young family – and trying to ensure that they are as well-prepared as possible for life when she's gone...

**I feel lucky...
I got to enjoy my children.
But I don't feel lucky for them**

I've done all I can now and I think they've got the message

Just after Christmas I was walking down the road and I felt like I was getting a hug from her. 'The last time I felt that was when I was diagnosed the last time. And it's almost like the next life, whatever that might be, it's a way of letting you know that everything is going to be okay, you just have to let go.'

Although she looks well today, her hair and make-up flawless for

felt as calm. You often hear from people, when they talk about someone who has died: "God they were great craic, they never looked as well." I have a sense of peace and calm because I'm not afraid of death and I have my beliefs.

'There have been a few times that my mam has come back to me.

'But that's completely gone now because the changes will be made and it won't be their responsibility to send off complaints or campaign.'

She also draws comfort from the fact that they will continue to live in Ballydavid.

'This is their home for definite,' she says. 'I think part of my journey was to bring them here. They're settled in a great school and there's a feeling like we've always been here. They settled in very well from the start, all the kids are fluent in Irish, so there's one barrier gone.'

'And then when you've loads of children you always get to know people pretty quickly.'

'You know, everything happens for a reason, I do believe in synchronicity and I do believe in the afterlife and that we'll see each other again, although I'm not totally sure whether that's religious or spiritual...'

'I mean, I'm dying and I've never

her presidential visit, Emma admits to being in some pain. She is still undergoing tests before her doctors determine a course of action.

'I'm sore,' she says. 'But I'm not on medication yet. We'll see what happens, the doctors will sort something out, they're working around the clock and these things take time.'

The bright evening sun is streaming in through the windows of the guesthouse, which overlooks the majestic Three Sisters, a group of peaks at the end of the Dingle Peninsula. Emma falls silent for a while, stretches slightly and stares out at the incredible view.

'God, I could fall asleep right here,' she says eventually. 'It's so strange that you're sitting here with me now and it was only last week when I rang you, when you were on your way down to interview me, to tell you that the cancer was back and it was terminal.'

'It feels like a month ago, so much has happened.'

'I needed to be vocal and aggressive, I needed to fight to get the message across that this isn't okay.'

'I am an example of what happens when people don't do their job right. When they forget about patient focus and cut corners. But I think they've [the Government



Close: Emma and her mum

and the HSE] got the message. I've done all I can now and I think they'll remember me.

'Now it's time for me to sit with the kids and watch Netflix. And just chill out.'

'But it shows you the power of voice. Here I am in Ballydavid, which is so far away from Dublin, but by letting your guard down and sharing what's really going on, it can make a difference.'

'I'm proud of myself. I fought back as hard as I got. There was no way I was going to let it lie. My life was worth too much to me and my children for me to go quietly.'

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THE SCHOOL THAT REALLY NEEDS €150,000

STANDING IN the middle of the gym hall at St Dominic's College in Ballyfermot, Dublin, I'm surrounded by a hodgepodge collection of buckets, basins and bins. At last count there were 14 holes in the roof and, even though it's bright and sunny outside, there are loud dripping sounds as large drops of water fall from the ceiling into the waiting vessels below.

There are a couple of traffic cones, with coloured tape tied between them, cordoning off the worst of the wet patches on the floor. Wads of newspaper have been placed under various buckets and bins to help soak up any spills or overflow.

Although it's a sports hall, with basketball hoops attached to the wall at both ends of the room — with the remnants of just one tattered and torn string net between them — there are no court markings on the well-worn floor. Given that the gym has to be mopped of excess water several times a day, it probably makes no sense to get lines put down.

'It doesn't seem to matter whether it's raining or not,' says school principal Mary Daly. 'The drips are always there. When it's no rain, it's condensation.'

First thing every morning, school caretaker Philip Hickey checks the hall to empty the buckets, mop the floor and lay down fresh newspaper. Built in the 1970s, the hall has suffered so much water damage that it is now impossible to bring in the equipment that is needed to mend the roof.

'All the joists under the floor area are rotten,' Philip explains. 'So we can't bring in any heavy machinery, like a hoist to fix the roof. The floor would just collapse under the weight.'

'I couldn't believe how bad it was when I started working here, and it's getting worse all the time. You're constantly looking at the weather. It's bad when it rains — during the recent snow it was like a waterfall in here.'

Outside, the school's sports facilities are little better. Across a badly pot-holed back yard, a muddy track leads to a couple of basketball courts that can double as tennis courts.

The tarmacadam, however, is covered in moss and the court markings can be barely made out.

'We have tried to get it removed a couple of times,' says Ms Daly. 'But it keeps coming back.'

Towards the back of the old convent building there is a small field.

'We got a grant through Deis some time back and we were able to have the area properly cleared,' Ms Daly explains of the Department of Education's programme to help young people at risk of educational disadvantage. 'We do use it on sports days and things like that, but as you can see, it's not suitable to be used as a proper sports pitch.'

Instead, the school's rugby team, which against the odds has enjoyed some success in the last couple of years, travels to a club in Celbridge, more than 15km away in Co Kildare, to practise and train.

It's a grim and dispiriting state of affairs for an all-girls secondary school that has more than 330 pupils. It's also rather galling to think that less than a 20-minute drive away, in the suburb of Ballinteer in South County Dublin, the students of private school Wesley College are celebrating their recent grant of €150,000 to resurface one of their four hockey pitches. The



by **Jenny Friel**

award, which was given as part of the Sports Capital Programme, might possibly have gone largely unnoticed. But then Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport Shane Ross decided to tweet about his delight at being able to confirm the news that Wesley, a co-educational school with more than 880 pupils, had been granted the €150,000.

The school, which charges day pupils €6,250 a year and their borders almost €9,000 per annum, is in the minister's Rathdown constituency. And while Shane Ross did not have any role in making or approving the grant, in his role as minister, he authorised the paying of this grant, along with many others.

His congratulatory tweet triggered an immediate and often viscerally angry response. School teachers from around the country took to social media and online news sites to blast the move as a perfect example of educational

'During the snow it was like a waterfall in here'

apartheid and the widening gap between the haves and the have nots.'

Many told of how they are teaching PE in schools that have no indoor gyms and where pupils have to change for their classes in mice-ridden sheds.

Others shared how their schools' lack of sports facilities will make it impossible for students to study PE for the Leaving Certificate, a new subject due to be introduced from next September.

Local councillors and TDs also slammed the announcement and some questioned how the Sports Capital Programme worked.

'It's the Government buying votes by targeting its own middle-class clubs,' claims Sinn Féin TD for Louth, Imelda Munster. 'This is meant to be for things like boxing and football clubs, taking children off the streets. It began as a way to promote sports in disadvantaged areas but it's clear that it's strayed hugely from what was intended.'

'This particular school [Wesley] already has an abundance of sports facilities. What has happened here is just blatant, it's beyond shocking, it's stomach-churning. It is

The huge grant given to Wesley to fix up one of its FOUR hockey pitches was greeted with disbelief this week — especially at this Dublin school, where the gym hall has 14 holes in the roof, the basketball hoops have no nets and the rugby pitch is unplayable...



Substandard: Principal Mary Daly stands under the roof's many leaks.



Constant struggle: Caretaker Philip Hickey at work and, inset left, PE teachers Sarah Dunphy and Claire McTigue

mer works grant from the Department of Education in 2016, but was turned down. 'We got it costed at the time, how much it would be to build a new hall and we were told €180,000,' says Ms Daly. 'But we were told by the Department it wasn't a priority.'

Despite the lack of facilities, the school does the best with what it has and the girls travel to other locations to practise and train.

'We play rugby, in fact we've had good success this year,' the principal explains. 'They play with a club, MU Barnhall, out in Celbridge. They use the hall and field we have here for training but have to go to Celbridge to play matches. And if they want to play a basketball match they have to use the local leisure centre here in Ballyfermot.'

St Dominic's gym hall is now so bad that Ms Daly is in the middle

of unfairness when you look at the facilities some schools have due to parental contributions.'

Has St Dominic's ever tried to fundraise itself locally to help fix the hall?

'There's no way in an area like Ballyfermot that we could fundraise significantly to upgrade our PE hall, it's just not possible,' she explains. 'There'd be no point, you can only try and raise small amounts, sometimes. There's too much pressure on parents here already. So you're solely reliant on the Department of Education.'

And what about the Sports Capital Programme, has she applied for that?

'No, we've never gone to them but of course it's something we'll look at,' she says. 'Ideally we'd like to link up with a local sports club, apply for funding and make the hall available to local clubs.'

The next SCP grants round, however, is unlikely to come through until the end of this year. And that's if the grants are awarded again at all. A quick call to the Sports Capital Programme Unit in Kerry this week revealed that no decision on when the next round will be opened up for applications has been made yet.

'That's up to the minister of the day,' explained a SCP officer. 'Nothing has been mentioned as yet. All we can advise is that sports clubs register with OSCAR [its Online Sports Capital Register] and you'll be emailed as soon as anything is announced.'

Standing at the edge of the small field at St Dominic's, you can see into the De la Salle school for boys next door, where there is a large swathe of pristine-looking GAA pitches.

'There's been a reduction in the local population in Ballyfermot, so the De la Salle is closing down soon,' explains Ms Daly. 'We're wondering what they're going to do with the buildings and the sports fields, you'd just love them.'

'It can be hard, over-looking the dream like this,' she adds with a small laugh. 'But the real dream would be that some philanthropic organisation or the business community would step in and help us to replace our hall. Imagine the difference it would make to the lives of the young girls who go here? Now that would be fantastic.'

In the meantime, the buckets, basins and bins remain at the ready...

is a strong history of music being taught there, from flute to saxophone to cello, sport is clearly also a priority.

As its website currently lists, it has four rugby pitches, one floodlit rugby grid, one soccer pitch, two full-size hockey astro-turf pitches, two mini hockey pitches, two full-size hockey grit pitches, 16 tennis courts, two cricket pitches, two outdoor basketball courts, one gymnasium and one sports hall, as well as athletics track and field facilities.

Over the coming years, it has planned a 'major building project centred around the sports hall and gymnasium which will rejuvenate this area of the campus, while adding state of the art facilities that will no doubt further improve our sporting prowess.'

Back in St Dominic's in Ballyfermot, the school's two PE teachers, Sarah Dunphy and Clare McTigue, admit to being more than a little surprised when they first began working there.

'When you're in college studying PE and the facilities are so good, you think it's going to be like that all the time,' explains Sarah. 'But

then you come here and see a hall like that, all you can think is: 'Aw jeez, what do we do with that?'

'It's very hard to foster a love of sports or PE or even teach in an environment like this. Of course the students are aware of how bad it is. They're dodging drips, or we have to stand in front of wet patches to make sure they don't slip while they're trying to play.'

'We have no choice but to use the hall daily,' adds Clare. 'You do the best you can and the girls understand. But when we take them out for away games, and they're playing on courts that are properly marked out, they're not prepared.'

'We got into a basketball quarter-final recently and the referee kept blowing the whistle at them, shouting at them to stand behind the line before throwing the ball in. All I could think was: "It's fair enough that they don't know, we don't have lines!" But it was so disappointing for them.'

The pupils are also very aware of the inequality between their school and others. 'How else can they feel but like second-class citizens?' ask their teachers.

Mary Daly is very aware of how

important sports and exercise are to young people and hugely welcomed the much-heralded introduction of PE as a Leaving Certificate subject. A teacher at St Dominic's since 1977 and principal since 2000, she has witnessed firsthand the different issues that have affected pupils over the years.

'Students these days are encountering a lot of mental health issues and things like obesity, but they need to fund schools properly if we are to be able to offer them a subject like PE,' she says. 'We didn't even consider applying to offer it as an option as we knew that our facilities were totally substandard to provide the opportunities for our students to participate in this most important subject.'

'There's an urgent need to have greater collaboration between Government departments, like the Department of Health, Department of Finance and Department of Education to ensure we provide a "level playing field" for our students.'

Ms Daly has spent much of her time as school principal trying to get better facilities for her students. St Dominic's College is

nothing less than discrimination and inequality in the distribution of these grants. We need a thorough investigation to look at where this money is going. And I have asked questions of the minister, about why these private clubs and private schools can't fund their own equipment needs.'

Under the SCP which is run by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, schools and private clubs must share facilities with local groups to qualify for the grant. Wesley College agreed to give pitch access to the local YMCA hockey club, which is one of the largest in the country and is based within Wesley's grounds.

Last November and December, the SCP allocated €60million to 1,800 projects. The deadline for appeals for applications that had been ruled invalid or partially invalid was January 19. Of the 149 appeals that were submitted, 35 were successful, which included Wesley College.

Also successful were five private golf clubs, three of which are in Dublin — Malahide Golf Club received €150,000, Balbriggan €103,430 and Slade Valley €97,760.

Former Dublin Lord Mayor and Dublin City Councillor for Crumlin/Kimmage, Criona Ni Dhálaigh, has spent years lobbying for extra funds for schools in her area.

'I can think of ten primary schools off the top of my head that don't have a blade of grass between them,' she says. 'Finally, in 2016, we managed to get money for James St CBS from the Council's

'Why can private schools not fund their own needs?'

Discretionary Fund to help them build an all-weather five-a-side pitch. They had nothing.

'So to hear about Wesley College, well it's hard to swallow when in an area like mine, you're constantly fighting for just basic facilities.'

Indeed, what is already available to the children who attend Wesley is seriously impressive. While there

Where will our loved ones go?

TERRY ANDERSON looks up from his newspaper. 'Hello, it's nice to meet you. Are you married? Do you have any children?' he asks, his deep brown eyes twinkling. 'That's my best friend,' he adds, nodding at an elderly woman who is snoozing in the chair beside him.

It's a midweek afternoon at the Rosalie Unit in Castlereagh, Co Roscommon, a HSE run facility for pensioners with mental health issues, and the majority of the residents are gathered in the bright and airy day-room. Framed photographs of clients line the shelves on either side of the massive fireplace. A couple of fancy lamps throw out a warm light over a collection of porcelain ornaments, made up of small matching statues of cheery looking dogs and a vase or two. Several colourful children's drawings are tacked to the walls.

There are about eight men and women sitting in comfortable looking chairs, one or two are reading, others are looking at the television or just straight ahead.

And although the atmosphere is warm and cosy, it's noticeable that apart from the low babble coming from the TV, it's very, very quiet.

'Up until recently enough this was a very vibrant, busy place,' says Liam Walsh, who's mother Breda has been a resident here since 2009.

'When mum first came here there were 34 residents, but now there are only 13. They put an embargo on taking in anyone new in September 2016, they did it without telling anyone. The only reason we know is because we noticed the place was getting quiet so people started asking questions. That's how we found out that they were planning on closing the Rosalie again.'



by **Jenny Friel**

an update'. But seeking an update is not the same as getting one. So I put forward a parliamentary question through my colleague Peter Burke [Fine Gael TD for Longford-Westmeath] and we finally got our answer in November.'

The reply confirmed their suspicions. 'It said that the unit would continue to provide care for the residents for as long as it was in the interest of the individual resident. That it was being managed by the Mental Health Service in Roscommon and the appropriateness of this arrangement needed to be examined.'

'But it also said that the unit had been closed to new admissions since September 2016 and it was not proposed to reopen the Rosalie to new admissions, that there was room at the unit in Ballinasloe to accommodate "Psychiatry of Later Life Patients", who have complex care needs.'

Relatives of residents were horrified at the official reply. Once again they rallied, holding a huge public meeting last February. They also met with Tony Canavan.

'He came to Castlereagh in February,' says Liam. 'He told family representatives that day that the only

update was secure.

'There was a group of us, representatives from Roscommon, who ended up at a meeting in Leinster House with Minister Lynch,' explains Liam. 'And she told us: "I can give you a firm commitment that our policy will be that it is not closing. It won't close and it will form part of the mental health services for this region going forward. It won't be allowed to fall below 15 beds."

'That was then confirmed in writing by the then Minister for Health, Leo Varadkar, to our county council. So of course, we came home very happy with ourselves, everyone was delighted.'

By the end of the following summer, however, relatives began to notice that things were getting very quiet.

'It was last August and I bumped into Liam while he was in visiting his mum,' says Jean Anderson, sister of Terry, who has been a resident at the Rosalie for six years.

'You just got a feeling that something was wrong. The numbers were dwindling and nobody was coming in for respite care, all those people who came in for two weeks at a time to give their families a break, there was nothing. So I gave Senator Maura Hopkins a call.'

Hopkins, who lives in Castlereagh, was already aware that things at the unit had changed.

'I was a councillor when the initial concerns about it closing arose back in 2015,' she says. 'And I was part of the delegation that met with Kathleen Lynch. I had a sense the unit wasn't functioning as it should be and I've been looking for answers about their admissions for the last year.'

'But I found it very difficult to get answers, there is a long trail of no replies from HSE management. I went to their offices in Galway on two occasions to talk to Tony Canavan [chief officer of HSE West]. I was told he was "seeking

In 2015, these families got ironclad guarantees from Minister Kathleen Lynch, the HSE and even Leo Varadkar that their local care home would not be closing down. Three years on, they fear those promises are being broken

ident and the future for them, the 20-odd beds that are empty and the future of the unit and how they're going to use it. Then there's the future of mental health services in this area of Roscommon.'

It's been a tense few months as relatives have tried to get definitive answers about what plans there are for their loved ones.

'It's been hugely stressful,' says Jean Anderson. 'If Terry is moved away, he could be some place that I won't be able to get to. There are mental health units in Ballinasloe and Castlebar but we don't have public transport this side of the Shannon.'

Jean, 66, lives in Ballaghaderreen, which is 20km away from Castlereagh and takes about 20 minutes in a car. 'Terry is 64 years old, there were just the two of us in the family,' she explains. 'He was living in Dublin and working in a bank when he was diagnosed with serious mental health issues in his late 20s. He came home to Roscommon to live with my mum, Mai, who took care of him.'

'Mum died in 1995 and I moved back down here from Dublin in 1996 to take care of him. He was gradually becoming more physically disabled, he had difficulties with walking. A place was found for him in the Rosalie in 2012. From the very start he settled in perfectly, there was never a problem, the staff are just excellent at the unit. Trust me, if he didn't like where he was he would tell me.'

'Just because someone has mental health issues, it doesn't mean they don't know what's happening around them. I thought it was a great place and I was so happy he was being taken care of so well. I couldn't take care of him like that.'

'It has made a huge difference to both our lives and I can come every day if I want to.'

Liam Walsh has also been



Campaign: Jean Anderson and Liam Walsh at the care

delighted at the care his mother Breda has received at the unit, which he describes as being an extension of his family's home.

'It was just the two of us for a long time,' he says. 'My father and brother died within a year of each other when I was 12 years old, my father of cancer and my brother was 15 when he had a brain haemorrhage, so since then it was me and her. Mam owned and ran the local bookies here in the town, she was involved in everything, she was very, very active. But in 2004 she was diagnosed with dementia, in her late 60s.'

'Between 2004 and 2009 she got progressively worse and needed more care. By good fortune I got a call from the local GP who said: "If you're making a decision, it's a good time to make it as there's a place in the Rosalie."

'It has a tremendous reputation but it was still a harrowing decision, I'll never forget driving her out there with her little suitcase. But within a few weeks she had settled in so well. It was fantastic. There was an absolute sense of

homeliness, care and attention. I've three young kids and they've been going in since they were born, they call it Granny Breda's house — that's what it's like, an extension of our house. We wander in and say hello to everyone, all the residents know the kids and play with them.'

'These residents are elderly, most of them never married, only four or five of them have any family at all left. This place is their home, it's what they know and love. We're fighting for them as much as our own relatives, they are our extended family at this stage and they could be sent anywhere.'

'The Rosalie should be held up as a beacon of how it can be done, it's such a wonderful facility.'

'Tony Canavan, however, says he believes residents at the Rosalie could get better care. 'We would have a view that the balance of the residents' care has shifted,' he told the Mail this week. 'Their needs are more in the line of physical or medical than psychiatric, which would possibly be better met in a different environment.'



Devoted: Jean Anderson with her brother Terry

'We're looking to see how best we can meet the current and future needs of the residents and we do believe it needs to be examined.'

So is the Rosalie being shut down? 'Yes and no is the short answer,' he says. 'It's true to say we haven't admitted any new residents since September 2016 and the reason is that going back a number of years ago, the idea of having a dementia-specific unit was a good way of providing care. But the thinking in that regard has changed quite considerably over the last number of years.'

'It's far more appropriate that care be provided, ideally, in people's own homes, if at all possible for as long as possible, or in long-stay facilities like nursing homes. The whole practise of care around dementia has shifted and changed quite a bit.'

'We have put a Psychiatry of Later Life team in place over the last three years, which operates throughout Co Roscommon. It looks after people in their own homes and in public and private

nursing homes. The need for us to admit people into the Rosalie has diminished considerably.'

The residents' relatives say they are very aware of the HSE's change in policy for the care of people with mental health issues.

'Yes, they have this concept of recovery and rehab,' says Liam

'It's difficult for people to cope with change'

Walsh. 'And it's made up of a team with medics and therapists and carers and all sorts, who will supervise living in an outside environment and it all sounds wonderful.'

'But there are a couple of issues. Number one, they don't have the resources for such a team. And they want to put the cart before the horse, they say long-term resi-

dential care is not appropriate, that we have to get them back into the community.'

'Absolutely fantastic, but let's not forget, there will always be the Breda Walshes of this world, who have dementia and have lost all capability of looking after themselves, and despite the best will in the world, need residential care. But they don't want to hear that in the context of psychiatry.'

Senator Maura Hopkins is also sceptical about the HSE's plans, largely because she says they have been far too slow to reveal them.

'We need to have confidence and need to be convinced that improvement is happening,' she says. 'When we hear of potential closures, that doesn't give us any confidence, in terms of what will be the replacement or improvement.'

'The Rosalie has been delivering a very high standard of care. And the key point is, that we need to ensure that we provide appropriate services in our local area. We don't know what the alternative plan is, we're not being given infor-



Visit: Liam and his mum Breda

hoped I would be in a position to attend, which of course I will.'

'I got no official invite,' says Liam Walsh. 'I was just told it was on, so we put on our best suits and got our petition with 5,540 signatures — and when there's only 3,000 people living in Castlereagh there's a lot of work went into that.'

'We were sitting in a boardroom, Minister Harris was in his office waiting to be called in, Ministers Daly and Naughten, three senators, county councillors, myself and the local GP. But no one from the HSE.'

Understandably, this failure of the HSE to attend the meeting has greatly angered the families.

Canavan said he knows the relatives believe the HSE have not properly engaged with them. 'I think that's a reasonable comment to some extent,' he says. 'But there is engagement taking place with them now and this is far in advance of any decision about the long-term care of their family members.'

'As things stand we've asked one of consultant psychiatrists, who looks after these people on a regular basis, to make an assessment of their needs, at a truly independent level. And to then come back to us when the process is complete and whatever the outcome of that is, we will implement.'

'It never started out as a decision about the closure of the unit. It was never an issue being driven by rationalisation or cost containment. It's about making the best decisions about these residents. All we can do is try and reassure people as much as possible, there is no conspiracy theory here.'

'It's difficult for people to sometimes cope with change, accept it or manage it, or difficult for them to accept the reasons why we may be making those changes.'

As the assessments get underway, relatives and staff at the facility can only wait, while trying to reassure worried residents that things will be okay.

'It's horrible to watch,' says Jean Anderson. 'Terry knows something is going on. I never said anything to him but he mentioned it to me one day: "Am I not going to be able to stay here?"'

'I said: "Of course you are, don't worry about it." And then he asked me: "Well if I can't, will I be able to go home?" All I could tell him was: "We'll worry about it when it happens." But I know he's stressed about it at times, which he could really do without. We both could.'