

Ivana Bacik TD
Dublin Bay South

Dáil Éireann, Kildare Street, Dublin 2 D02 XR20

Dáil Éireann, Teach Laighean, Sráid Chill Dara, Baile Átha Cliath 2



The Secretary,

An Coimisiún Pleanála

64 Marlborough Street, Dublin 1

17 April 2026

RE: Planning application for a large-scale development at Bessborough, Ballinure, Blackrock, Cork
Cork City Council Planning Ref. 25/44442

Background

Dear Sir/Madam

As leader of the Labour Party, I am submitting this observation in support of the appeal submitted by Cllr. Peter Horgan against the grant of planning permission for a large-scale development at Bessborough, Cork — the site of the former Bessborough Mother and Baby institution. I am asking An Coimisiún Pleanála to refuse permission for this development.

Bessborough operated from 1922 to 1998, run by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. More than 18,000 women and children passed through it. Over 923 children are recorded as having died there. Burial records exist for only 64 of them. The whereabouts of the rest are unknown and many of the mothers whose children died at Bessborough have never been told where they are buried.

Cork City Council granted planning permission for the development of Estuary View Estates on the 25th February 2026, subject to 70 conditions, for the demolition of ten existing structures and the construction of 140 residential apartments across three blocks.

I am asking An Coimisiún Pleanála to overturn that decision.

This Site Has Not Been Properly Investigated

No comprehensive excavation of the Bessborough grounds has ever been carried out. As highlighted by Dr Maeve O'Rourke, Dr Claire McGettrick and Dr Máiréad Enright of the Clann Project, The Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation (MBHCOI) did not use all reasonable means — ground-penetrating radar, electrical resistivity surveys, magnetometry — to establish whether and where the disappeared are buried.¹ Its archive remains closed to survivors and to the public and is inaccessible to An Coimisiún Pleanála and Cork City Council itself.²

The Clann Project's letter to An Coimisiún Pleanála states plainly that the State is aware of a situation of mass disappearance and the strong probability that some of the disappeared are buried in the

¹ O'Rourke et. al, *Letter to An Coimisiún Pleanála RE: Large Scale Development proposal, "The Farm"*
<https://researchrepository.universityofgalway.ie/server/api/core/bitstreams/7a535e89-a078-45d7-902b-fb06dfa4a802/content>

² Ibid.

grounds of Bessborough.³ They further note that the State has not complied with its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights to investigate the deaths of children and mothers or to ascertain the whereabouts of the disappeared and return their remains to their families.⁴

Families have been waiting for decades to find out what happened to their children and siblings and parents. This development, if allowed to proceed, would foreclose that possibility permanently.

An Coimisiún Pleanála Has Refused This Site Before — And the Conditions Have Not Changed

It is important to note that An Bord Pleanála and An Coimisiún Pleanála have refused planning permission for this site multiple times in May 2021. The stated reason, in 2021 and 2024, was the lack of clarity about the whereabouts of children and mothers who were confined at Bessborough. Nothing material has changed since those refusals. The remains have not been located. The archive has not been opened. The ECHR investigation obligations remain unmet.

The condition now attached to this permission — that the developer carry out archaeological excavations during construction — does not meet the threshold required. Survivors are right to say this is inadequate. A developer-led excavation, conducted under commercial and time pressures, is not an acceptable substitute for the thorough, State-led investigation that these families are owed. As the Clann Project academics note, An Coimisiún Pleanála cannot discharge or delegate the State's human rights obligations by attaching conditions to a private developer's planning permission.

Voices That Must Be Heard

I would urge An Coimisiún Pleanála to listen to the voices of all those campaigners and advocates who have raised their very justified concerns with the development of the land at Bessborough, and detailed the hurt that would ensue if the grant of planning permission is not granted.

Patricia Carey, the Special Advocate for Survivors, has called for an immediate halt to any development at Bessborough, and has sought a full programme of works to identify all burial grounds on the institution's lands. She has described this proposed development as an outrage and an affront to the dignity of all those who died there.

The Bessborough Mother and Baby 'Home' Support Group has campaigned on this for years. Carmel Cantwell, one of its members, has spent decades trying to establish what happened to her mother Bridget's son, her only brother William, who died at Bessborough. The testimony of Resident K who gave birth at Bessborough in the early 1980s, detailed in the MBHCOI Final Report, is particularly stark. After being told the baby was stillborn, she never had the chance to see or hold her baby, nor given the opportunity to attend a burial. She was not given any details of how the remains of her baby were dealt with.⁵ This is the lived reality of people whose families were broken by this institution and who have received almost nothing from the State in the way of truth or answers.

My colleague, Labour Senator Laura Harmon, has spoken with directness about what this site represents. As she has written in *The Journal* on 22nd March 2026:⁶ those incarcerated in Bessborough and those born there have suffered enough without seeing history rewritten in this way. Cork City Council has committed to becoming a trauma-informed city. That means acknowledging that sites like

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/bessborough-apartments-6989470-Mar2026/>

Bessborough carry a particular weight. Labour Councillor Peter Horgan has been making this case in Cork for years and I commend his sustained advocacy.

On the Housing Argument

I am aware that the acute housing shortage in Cork City will be cited in favour of this development, and I do not dismiss that concern lightly. Indeed, housing needs are of huge importance to survivors of institutional abuse – a significant proportion of those are on local authority waiting lists for social housing, or live in substandard conditions.⁷ The Labour Party is committed to addressing Ireland's housing crisis. Labour Party Councillors have voted in favour of all part 8 housing developments and are actively working with officials on identifying sites even on Bessborough Road itself.

But the housing emergency does not require us to build on sites where the remains of children are likely to be buried and where State investigations remain incomplete. As detailed by Senator Harmon, within two kilometres of Cork City Centre there are over 700 vacant and derelict sites. A more determined approach to dereliction from central Government, and to above-the-shop and infill development, can yield significant housing numbers without requiring us to concrete over a site of this gravity. The argument that we must build here, at Bessborough, to address the housing crisis is not one that holds up. It is the wrong site.

Conclusion

An Coimisiún Pleanála previously refused this site multiple times on well-founded grounds. Those grounds remain. The State's ECHR obligations have not been discharged. No full excavation has been carried out. The families of the 859 children whose burial sites remain unknown have not been given the answers they are owed.

Proceeding with this development in these circumstances is not a neutral planning decision. It is a choice about what the State values — whether it will treat the lives of children who died in institutions, and the grief of the families left behind, as something that warrants proper investigation, or whether it will allow them to be built over.

I am asking An Coimisiún Pleanála to overturn the decision to grant planning permission for the proposed development at Bessborough, and to do so on the clear and well-established grounds that this site cannot be developed until the State has met its obligations to the families affected.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ivana Bacik'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Ivana' and the last name 'Bacik' clearly distinguishable.

Ivana Bacik TD

⁷ *Report of the Special Advocate for Survivors of Institutional Abuse*, March 2025 p43