

**Observation from the Special Advocate for Survivors of Institutional Abuse
to An Coimisiún Pleanála (Case Number: 324153)**

13 April 2026

The Special Advocate for Survivors calls for the immediate halt of any development at Bessborough, and a programme of works to begin without any further delay to identify burial grounds of all those children and women buried on the institution's lands.

The proposed housing development on the grounds of the former Mother and Baby Home Institution in Bessborough, County Cork is an outrage and an affront to the dignity of all those who died there.

Patricia Carey said

“Dignified burial, location of burial grounds and dignified memorialisation is one of the most frequently raised issues with me over the last two years during my meetings and engagements with over two thousand Survivors and their family members.”

- **This subject continues to cause immense distress, pain and upset to Survivors and Affected Persons who lack information, records and a place of burial or a space for remembering their family members. All institutional sites where children and adults are buried must be fully investigated, burial grounds located and dignified memorials based on the families and survivors' wishes built as a permanent reminder of our dark institutional past.**
- **It is incumbent on the Irish Government that they once and for all commit to a Human-Rights Approach to Dignified Burial and Memorialisation for Bessborough and all other sites where children and women who died in institutions are buried**
- **The State is failing to address the human rights violations that occurred under the extensive system of institutional abuse and forced family separation which took place in Ireland, and as a result is perpetuating ongoing trauma to Survivors and their families.**
- **The Special Advocate is extremely concerned that Cork City Council has granted planning permission to build an apartment development on the grounds of Bessborough, the Mother and Baby Home Institution which operated between 1922 and 1998**
- **Of the 923 children who died in Bessborough, the burial records of only 64 of these children have been identified and located – this is an absolute disgrace.**
- **The burial grounds at Bessborough have still not been identified, and with so many deceased children missing burial records, this can only be described as ‘manifestly inappropriate’.**
- **The ongoing failure by the State to locate, identify and properly memorialise the burial site of children who died in Bessborough and other mother and baby institutions, is unacceptable. This situation at Bessborough and at other Mother and Baby Home Institutions across Ireland with unmarked sites are causing**



immense pain and trauma to Survivors, Affected Persons and the family members of the deceased babies and children.

- **The Special Advocate acknowledges and commends the important advocacy for years by Survivors calling for these burial grounds to be identified and fully supports the recent vigil by Survivors and supporters at Bessborough on International Women's Day, and the protest outside Leinster House.**
- **Survivors should not have to resort to making public their own personal pain, trauma in order to bring public attention to this ongoing injustice and outrage, and to call on both National and Local Government to halt this development.**
- **The Special Advocate calls on the State to finally take full and comprehensive action in relation to sites of mass burial and unmarked graves at institutions. The views of Survivors, Affected Persons and their family members must play a central role in any decision to memorialise these sites of mass burial at institutions.**
- **It is critical that Survivors, Affected Persons and their family members are part of this process, in deciding how sites of mass burial or unmarked graves are identified, protected and sensitively memorialised.**

Introduction

Dignified Burial, the identification and proper protection of burial grounds, and the need for sensitive memorialisation are some of the most important and frequently raised issues shared by Survivors and their family members with the Special Advocate for Survivors.

The Special Advocate has received ongoing communications from hundreds of Survivors, their family members and Survivor groups in relation to the need for dignified burial and the sensitive treatment of mass graves, unmarked graves and sites of burial across institutions in Ireland.

The recent announcement that Cork City Council has granted planning for a large apartment development on the site of Bessborough has caused secondary trauma and extreme upset for the mothers and families of all those who died there.

The Special Advocate acknowledges and commends the ongoing advocacy by Survivors and their supporters who have been campaigning for years for at Bessborough, as well as at Sean Ross, Castlepollard and multiple other sites around the country, on this matter. She fully supports the recent vigil by Survivors and supporters at Bessborough on International Women's Day, and the protest outside Leinster House.

Inappropriate redevelopment at sites of conscience or sites of mass, unmarked burial at institutions

“I cannot find out and cannot get answers. There is no death certificate or birth certificates for him. I need to find his place of rest so that I can go to him, talk to him at his graveside. This is so important and also so painful for me”

- Quote from Survivor

Of the over 923 children who died in Bessborough, the burial records of only 64 graves have been identified and located¹. Over 18 thousand women and children spent time in Bessborough and many of those mothers whose children died there, still do not know where their children are buried. The institution had at one time, an infant mortality rate of 82% with many children being certified as dying due to ‘*Marasmus*’ or severe malnutrition.

The Fifth Interim report of the Commission of Investigation (15 March 2019) highlighted that the major issues with regards to burials “*arise in the cases of Bessborough and Tuam. It is not known where the vast majority of the children who died in Bessborough are buried.*”².

While the developers who have been granted planning permission by Cork City Council are required to employ an archaeologist to monitor the excavation for “*items of evidential value indicative of potential burials, such as coffin timber and coffin nails*”, this is not in any way sufficient or appropriate.

The site of Bessborough is wholly inappropriate for this type of development, and not in line with the respectful and lawful handling of mass graves.

As outlined in the Action Plan for Survivors and Former Residents of Mother and Baby and County Home Institutions Questions and Answers, in response to the steps the Government is taking to preserve burial sites associated with former Mother and Baby Institutions, the Department noted that:

“the Planning and Development Act 2000 currently enables local authorities to protect potential burial sites from possible harmful development. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is preparing a circular to issue to all planning authorities, advising them of the precautionary approach to be taken in statutory

¹ Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, Chapter 18: Bessborough, 12 January 2021 [Chapter 18 Bessborough](#)

² Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation Fifth interim report, 15 March 2019 [44b45fc9-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes-and-certain-related-ma.pdf](#)

development plans for the proper safeguarding of burial sites from potentially harmful development”.³

The Survivors and Affected Persons, and the families of those who died and are buried at Bessborough have a right to the truth and full unredacted information surrounding the circumstances of their children and relatives’ deaths and burials.

Need for the Identification, Protection and Sensitive Marking of all Burial Grounds at Institutions

“I don’t know where she is, I walk around the field looking for some sort of sign that maybe, she might be buried there. My whole life has been looking for her, and in her death, this continues”

- Quote from Survivor

Those buried in these mass, unmarked graves at institutions located around Ireland, including at Bessborough, and those families who mourn them must be treated with dignity and respect for their human rights. Survivors and their family members must have a central role in, and agency for, survivors in shaping how this law is made, and how it operates.

While noting that it may not always be possible to retrieve, identify or return these remains to family members, it does not diminish the obligation on the State to make best efforts regarding the approach to the treatment of these extremely sensitive sites.

It is the position of the Special Advocate for Survivors that manifestly inappropriate burials at sites across Ireland, should include those missing a burial record or where a “*burial site where the circumstances surrounding the death and/or the body-disposal method warrant an investigation as to their lawfulness*”.⁴

The Final report of the Commission of Investigation found that it has not been able to establish where the majority of the Bessborough are buried.

The Special Advocate for Survivors regularly hears from family members that there is a need to know the fate and whereabouts of these children and to receive their mortal remains for burials or, a dignified commemoration. Therefore, effective legislation that will protect and preserve mass graves, and provide for the identification and return of mortal remains to family members where possible, is critical and must play an important part in providing truth and justice to these individuals.

³ An Action Plan for Survivors and Former Residents of Mother and Baby and County Home Institutions Questions and Answers page 12 [an-action-plan-for-survivors-and-former-residents-of-mother-and-baby-and-county-home-i.pdf](#)

⁴ United Nations General Assembly (2020) Report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Mass graves, highlighting the multitude of sites of mass killings and unlawful deaths across history and the world, UN Doc A/75/384, para 17(d).

As referenced in IHREC’s submission to the Joint Committee on the General Scheme of a Certain Institutional Burials (Authorised Interventions) Bill,

“the State is under a legal duty to investigate mass burials, and to preserve and protect evidence at relevant sites. Whilst an intervention may not be possible or appropriate in certain circumstances, such circumstances should be construed strictly and with due regard the relevant human rights and equality of survivors and family members of the deceased.”⁵

Release of the Commission of Investigation records in relation to burial sites across Ireland’s network of Mother and Baby Institutions

“I want to advocate for full and clear unredacted access to information for all people concerned, anything less is not acceptable... Our community has experienced delays all our lives in getting access to information about what happened and where these children are buried”

- Quote from Survivor

The Special Advocate regularly hears from Survivors of Bessborough, Sean Ross, Castlepollard and other institutions seeking the truth about what happened at the sites and where their loved ones are buried. This includes access to the full and unredacted records gathered by the Commission of Investigation about possible sites of burial at these places.

The Special Advocate calls for the release of any relevant information ascertained from the Commission of Inquiry relating to manifestly inappropriate burials at Mother and Baby Institutions across Ireland, in order to provide Survivors, Affected Persons and their family members with all available information about what took place at these sites.

It is the position of the Special Advocate that any death without a corresponding burial record, can in this circumstance be considered as ‘manifestly inappropriate’.

Commitment by the State to ensuring Permanent, Sensitive and Appropriate Memorialisation at Institutions, underpinned by meaningful participation by and engagement with Survivors and Affected Persons and their families

He mattered. His life mattered. What happened to him mattered.

- Quote from Survivor

⁵ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, Submission to Joint Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration on the General Scheme of a Certain Institutional Burials (Authorised Interventions) Bill, February 2021. [IHREC-Submission-to-the-Joint-Committee-on-Children-Disability-Equality-and-Integration-on-the-General-Scheme-of-a-Certain-Institutional-Burials-Authorised-Interventions-Bill-FINAL.pdf](#)

The Special Advocate has heard from many Survivors and their families on the strong and long-held desire to visit sites of institutions, to spend time there and to reflect on and to remember their experience, or the experience of their loved ones, in these institutions. The Special Advocate recognises that for some visiting the sites of former institutions is a cathartic experience, and gathering together is important to some Survivors and Affected Persons and their families.

The views of Survivors, Affected Persons and their family members must play a central role in any decision to memorialise these sites of mass burial at institutions, and the State must ensure meaningful engagement on the treatment of these important sites with Survivors.

Acknowledgment of local sites of conscience is critical to ensure what happened is not forgotten and is visibly remembered in communities across Ireland and by the Irish People as a whole. This should happen in ways decided by Survivors who spent time in each institution and place. Appropriate local memorialisation is important not only for the Survivors themselves, but also the local communities who live near these institutions.



Patricia Carey
Special Advocate for Survivors of Institutional Abuse

ENDS

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About the Special Advocate for Survivors of Institutional Abuse

The appointment of a Special Advocate for Survivors fulfils a core commitment in the Government's Action Plan for Survivors and Former Residents of Mother and Baby and County Home Institutions, which contains a number of measures designed to address broader experiences of institutional trauma and forced family separation. This Action Plan recognises that the response of Government to the legacy of these institutions must be directly informed by the voices of those most centrally affected.

The Special Advocate's remit encompasses Mother and Baby Institutions, County Home Institutions, Magdalene Laundries, Industrial and Reformatory School Institutions, and related institutions, and those adopted, boarded out or the subject of an illegal birth registration.

The Special Advocate is operationally independent of Government.

The role of the Special Advocate for Survivors is to:

- ensure that the views of Survivors and Affected Persons are central to the delivery of the State's response to the legacy of institutional abuse and forced family separation
- promote the collective interests of Survivors and Affected Persons, as expressed by them, and amplify their voices as a central, essential input to Government deliberations on matters which affect them.

About Patricia Carey

Patricia Carey has been in the role as Special Advocate for Survivors since 25 March 2024. Patricia Carey served as the CEO of the Adoption Authority of Ireland from 2014 to 2022, leading the Authority's work on the Birth Information and Tracing Act. Prior to this role she held the position of Director of Services for St Vincent De Paul, and has also held various volunteer leadership roles, including Chairperson of Connect Counselling for Survivors of Institutional Abuse and a founding member of Outhouse resource centre for the LGBT+ community. As an adopted person born in Bessborough Mother and Baby Institution, Patricia Carey brings a unique perspective and dedication to her work.

