

On behalf of Bessboro Mother & Baby Home Support Group,
C/O Carmel Cantwell, 6 Meadowlands, Upper Rochestown, Cork.

Opening statement:

The lands and existing buildings at Bessborough are what is left of the former Mother and Baby Institution ran by the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The Institution was supported by the local authority paying a stipend for each mother and child. There were inspections carried out at Bessborough by the Chief Medical Officer and the Local Authority which evidenced that the infant mortality rate especially in the 1940's was at times 5 times higher than the national average. This information was also known by the Taoiseach of the day. Despite this a promised investigation was dropped in 1947 by the Chief Medical Officer. If this investigation had gone ahead many childrens lives may have been saved. The point being that these women and children that died were let down by all concerned. To this day Mothers have had to fight every step of the way to get information about their children and if that child died, it was and still is near impossible to obtain any information.

The legacy of the institution is a bleak one. A history that shows the inhumane way people were treated. In this context the State, local authorities and society should now show their compassion and empathy by preserving all the existing lands in memory of the nearly 19,000 women and children that were incarcerated in Bessborough as well as the 923 children and 31 women that died of which the burial places of 859 children are not known to this day.

We know from witnesses that children were buried on the grounds, but what we don't know is if there is a mass grave. The controversy over the 1949/50 trace map and its interpretation has caused much hurt in our community. The facts are that many experts have interpreted the map differently to Mr. Clarkin's view expressed in the Oral Hearing in 2021. Instead of getting on with the investigation to find burials, the children's narrative is being lost. The local authority and the Government have failed to conduct an exhaustive investigation into the deaths and burial places of those deceased at Bessborough.

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The Meadows

Whilst any part of the land that is preserved is welcomed, the proposed Remembrance Park in front of Bessborough House is in our opinion more about honouring the preservation of landscape in front of the house and not about remembering those that died or who were incarcerated in Bessborough. The lawn in front of the house is unlikely to have any burials as this would be in full sight of Bessborough house and the drive to it from the main gates.

Planning permission was refused last year for MWB Two Ltd, as there was too much ambiguity around burials possibly being in the area proposed for development. We suggest that this uncertainty applies to the E.V.E. 2020 proposed development. In 2019 there were several trenches put through this area including the area that CSSA say is a children's burial ground, based on their interpretation of the 1949 trace map. However, this ground investigation was inconclusive and therefore we have to consider that the majority of burials are not confined to this one area. E.V.E.2020 are proposing to do forensic archaeological testing in conjunction with the construction. This is a means to an end to achieve a building development. This is hurtful to us as it is not about finding nor honouring the missing children and their families. Every one of those children was a real person and was with a mother who wasn't given the dignity and respect to be allowed to bury their own child in a manner that they would have liked.

Any investigation should be done independently without any other motives or possible conflict of interest.

The Farmyard

This area where possible should be preserved and out houses sensitively restored. This was an area where the women and children worked side by side. This area could provide a space for the community, for projects, meetings etc. Twenty-five years ago the farm yard was a heritage park created by the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. For many years this was a place for families to come and enjoy, to visit the museum and to see the vintage farm equipment. The café in the farmyard catered for children's parties.

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Reasons for objecting the developments:

1. The undisputed fact that 859 children registered as born in Bessborough are missing. There is too much ambiguity surrounding burials at Bessborough and until a full independent investigation is carried out to determine the truth there should be no further construction on the grounds. The Mother and Baby Home Commission of Investigation has confirmed in its Report that the burial place(s) of those 859 children is unknown.
2. The former Mother and Baby 'home' is part of Blackrock's identity, its heritage should be preserved and never be forgotten.
3. Climate change - to preserve as much as the flora and fauna as possible and to encourage green spaces in our suburbs.
4. Bessborough's close proximity to Douglas estuary supports the biodiversity of the area and should be kept as part of the conservation area.
5. Bessborough would make a great Regional Park.
6. Preserving Bessborough as a green space will become more important to quality of life as the city expands.
7. Cork City Development Plan 2022-28, Green infrastructure:

"The development of major city parks in the city's hinterland are required to meet the needs of the city population and to provide invaluable amenities and meet current deficits."

"objective of improving quality of life for all residents of the city., to build on Cork City's rich culture heritage to foster learning, culture, heritage and the arts throughout the city."
8. The Farmyard development is cramped and too near Bessborough House and the services.

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9. There are possible areas for housing in the future if any of the businesses in Bessboro Road become unused, such as the former warehouse opposite the gates of the Bessborough estate where construction has commenced to provide 137 residential units. Also the Crawford Gate development of 64 houses. As more areas become developed in Blackrock/Mahon, if Bessborough was made into a Regional Park it would become a sanctuary for the community. It is already used as place where people walk and enjoy the green space.
10. If the 'Meadows' area and the site below it were put back to original grasslands, we could have a real 'meadow' for the whole community to use, for workers in the surrounding retail parks, hospital, offices etc with access straight from the greenway.
11. The proposed developments are not in keeping with the historical setting and landscape of Bessborough House or the historical history of the former mother and baby institution.
12. Adoptees come from all over the world to visit the place they were born in and reflect on how lucky they were to get out alive. Mothers come to reflect on their time there and grieve for their children lost to adoption or whose burial places are unknown. We are all outraged at the thought that this peaceful space could be overshadowed by blocks of apartments in the future. The threat of such development(s) add to and perpetuates the trauma suffered by Bessborough survivors.
13. We have an opportunity here to change the legacy of Bessborough. Already there are great works being carried there such as providing care to vulnerable families and other services to the community. It is imperative that any development does not have any negative impact on these services which are provided by the HSE and other Agencies.

On behalf of
The Bessboro Mother & Baby Home Support Group

Carmel Cantwell

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Carmel Cantwell
Margaret Clifford
Denise Bermingham
Jane Libberton
Philomena Lee
PJ Coogan
Lyn Durkin
Jackie Lyons
Marie Barry
Ann Crowe
Trassa Ni Aonghusa
Miriam Delaney
Marguerite Furlong Harpur
Martin Parfrey
Brian Cantwell
Amy O'Mahony
Josephine Mannion
Christopher Kirwan
Margaret O'Donnell
Maria Barry
Maria Keating Dumbell
Lelia Foley
Deidre Crowley
Noreen Condon
Elizabeth Chambers
Mary Curtin
Noelle Brown
Geraldine Donovan
Alan Bennett
Greg Coughlan
Rose Kissane
Mari Tatlow Steed
Phil Cullen
Nichola Corcoran
Phil Conway
Ann Kinsella
Joy Kelly O'Regan
Brian McMahon
Pam Meehan
Alice Coughlan
Geraldine Ahern
Janice Lanigan
Brendan Carroll Lanigan
Madeleine Walsh
Therese Meyer
Jacinta Daly
Maureen Emily
Joy Gannon
Anna Marie Flanagan
Mark Sellars

Harriett Salmon
Carmel Hayes
Breda Fitzgerald Power
Edwina O'Brien
Helen Kiely-O'Regan
Anne Harris
Maeve Joyce
Miriam Delaney
Paraic Elliott
Ger Willis
Imelda Masterson
Aisling Collins
Kerry Falvey
Pam Mullins
Ciara Gannon
Tara Cahill
Moira Gleeson
Gerard Pius Enright
Tracy Harrington
Mary Gaynor
Ena Ronanye

"My first reaction was of enormous sadness. These are children who while they were alive had rights, the rights to protection and who if dead had the right to be looked after with dignity. Time doesn't remove any of those rights."

President Michael D. Higgins