

IRISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS MOTHER AND BABY HOMES AND ADOPTION WORKING GROUP

INFORMATION GUIDE AND ETHICAL PROTOCOLS FOR GROUP MEMBERS

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INTRODUCTION

This document has two main purposes. First, it provides information and guidance on the purpose(s) and operation of the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) Mother and Baby Homes and Adoption Working Group (MBHA WG). Second, the document also sets out the operational and ethical protocols for the planned listening exercises with social workers and affected people. The document is intended to provide information to MBHA WG members, as well as IASW staff and board members. A separate information document (providing additional context) will be provided to affected people participating in the listening exercises.

This information guide is a living document that may be amended in the future as required.

WHAT IS THE MBHA WG AND WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

On 15th February 2021, the IASW [apologised](#) 'unreservedly for the pain and distress caused by the failings of social work, outlined in the Report of the Commission into the Mother and Baby Homes'. As the IASW statement explains:

The report provides examples of times when the social work profession did not provide compassionate support, failed to uphold basic human rights, and failed to challenge the social and institutional injustices, which caused such devastation in the lives of women and children.

The apology marked the beginning of a period of reflection for the organisation. As set out in the IASW's statement, the apology was motivated by the testimony of affected people and was made in line with the core social work principle to 'speak up and challenge social injustice'. In this context, the IASW made a commitment to providing a space for members to advocate for positive social change. The IASW also committed to developing 'a response to ensure that the lessons from the testimonies inform our contemporary work with survivors and others who are marginalised and silenced in Irish society'. The MBHA WG was established as an action arising from the IASW apology on foot of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission Report in February 2021. The group is led by Majella Hickey (IASW member) and Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes (IASW board member, co-director of the Clann Project and an adopted person).

IS THE MBHA WG AN IASW SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP?

As outlined above, the MBHA WG is a collective which was established as a key action arising from IASW's apology. Therefore, it is not a Special Interest Group (SIG). We are cognisant of the fact that the *Birth (Information and Tracing) Act* came into force in 2022, and that this has altered the adoption landscape in Ireland, prompting the need for discussion amongst adoption social workers. However, while aspects of adoption social work practice may come up in MBHA WG discussions, the primary purpose of this group is to provide a space to respond to the issues arising from the IASW apology. Claire and Majella would welcome the opportunity to give a presentation about the work of the MBHA WG to the Irish Council of Social Workers in Adoption if the group wishes to extend an invitation.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE MBHA WG

Who Can Join the MBHA WG?

In line with IASW policy, membership of the MBHA WG is restricted to IASW members only. We believe that the work of the group can benefit from having social work members who work both within and outside of adoption practice, and thus, we welcome the participation of social workers outside this immediate area of expertise.

Can New Members Join?

As we are currently running a pilot project consisting of a series of listening exercises involving potentially sensitive discussions (see below), for the moment, the group is no longer open to new members. On completion of the pilot phase, we will review the matter and reopen membership to social workers who may be interested in participating in future listening exercises and/or other discussions and events.

LISTENING EXERCISES

To progress the work of the MBHA WG, we will hold a series of (separate) listening exercises with social workers and people affected by adoption and the Mother and Baby Homes. These meetings will be facilitated by Majella and Claire, and their overarching purpose is to create a space where we as the coordinators of the group can hear from affected people and MBHA WG members. The first listening exercise (which was open to current Adoption/Mother and Baby Homes Group members only) took place on 24th June. A further listening exercise will take place on 16th September for those who were unable to attend in June.

In the near future, Majella and Claire will hold a listening exercise with a small number of people affected by adoption and the Mother and Baby Homes, to also hear their experiences. We will use the listening exercises to help us to understand the various perspectives relevant to the work of this group. These exercises are also intended to ensure that all involved have an opportunity to hear and understand other people's perspectives. We intend to use what we have learned from these gatherings to inform the future work of the group, in accordance with the commitment to meaningful action as set out in the IASW apology. We also hope that these meetings will act as pilots for further listening exercises.

Listening Exercises: What to Expect

During the listening exercises we will be asking you to reflect on three main questions, as set out below. We are conscious that discussions may require a considerable amount of time, and if necessary, the next meeting can be used to continue the exercise (or we can organise another gathering more immediately). The questions we would like you to consider are as follows:

1. What would you like to tell us about your experiences of adoption and the Mother and Baby Homes?
2. In its apology, the IASW committed to providing a space for its members to advocate for positive social change. What social changes do you believe are required in this area?
3. In the apology, the IASW also committed to developing 'a response to ensure that the lessons from [affected people's] testimonies inform our contemporary work with survivors and others who are marginalised and silenced in Irish society'. What are your views on how the work of current social work professionals can be informed by affected people's testimonies?

We wish to provide a safe space for attendees to feel comfortable to share their honest views. Thus, our role as facilitators is primarily *to listen*. While we will take notes at the meeting in order to compile feedback, **we can assure participants that all views will be anonymised in any reports/presentations or other publications arising from listening exercises.**

Listening Exercises with Affected People

The main purpose of the listening exercises with affected people is to provide a space for individuals with personal experience of adoption and the Mother and Baby Homes to tell us about their encounters with social work practice. We will ask attendees the same three questions.

What Will Happen to the Information Gathered at Listening Exercises?

As stated above, all information gathered at the listening exercises will be fully anonymised. During the initial phase, we plan to use the listening exercises to inform the future work of the group, including further gatherings. Additionally, we provide regular reports to the Board of Directors on our work, and within these reports we may provide a broad overview of the matters under discussion during group meetings. Furthermore, as the group was established as a key action emanating from the IASW's apology, in the spirit of transparency and accountability, at some time in the future we will publish a public-facing report on our work. We may also make presentations or other reports from time to time. Because we believe the information gathered during the listening exercises will be of significant value and importance, we envisage that we will use anonymised information from listening exercises in these publications. **However, if an attendee would prefer that a particular comment or view is not made publicly available (even in anonymised form), we will respect your wishes. In the event that this is the case, we ask that this is clearly communicated to the facilitators either in the meeting or directly afterwards via email.**

Ethical Protocols

The listening exercises with affected people will be carried out in accordance with the [Ethical Protocols](#) devised by the Clann Project, which gathered testimonies from this cohort. All listening exercises will be operated in accordance with the IASW [Code of Ethics](#), the CORU [Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics](#) and the International Federation of Social Workers' [Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles](#), which is underpinned by principles of 'social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities'. Finally, attendees are asked to be aware of the following ground rules:

- Respect for other attendees;
- All attendees are encouraged to participate;
- If you make a disclosure in relation to a child protection and welfare or adult safeguarding issue, please be advised that the group facilitators will refer the matter to the appropriate agencies;
- If an affected person makes a disclosure in relation to contemporary social work practice, they will be advised of their right to make a complaint to the relevant authorities;
- At each listening exercise, attendees will be provided with an opportunity to suggest further ground rules for their group.

SUPPORTS

The facilitators are cognisant that the issues under discussion are of a sensitive nature. Attendees who require support and/or information are referred to the [resources page](#) on the Clann Project website (including the supports and services listed in its [Information Guide](#)). Affected people are also welcome to join the Adoption Rights Alliance [Peer Support Group](#).