

In July 2021 I undertook the task of searching for the State records that informed Martin McAleese and the members of the Inter Departmental Committee when they produced the Report into State Involvement in Magdalene Laundries. When it concluded the IDC created its own dedicated archive of all of the material it had gathered, and stated in the final Report that this “will be a concrete outcome to the Committee’s work and may be a resource for future research”. However, frequent requests for access to these records were refused on a wide variety of grounds. Eventually in April 2021 JFMR was given access to a 23 page Index that listed all of the records held in this designated archive.

Armed with this list I set about trying to track down the original records from all of the relevant state departments using Freedom of Information legislation. All (except one) of the FOI requests were refused. Among the grounds given for refusal were that; the scale of the request was too big, that there was insufficient data from the Index to identify the records or that the information requested was otherwise available and didn’t come under FOI legislation. In one case, Revenue, they said they couldn’t find any correspondence between Revenue and the IDC despite the fact that the IDC listed correspondence with Revenue in their Index .

The response to my FOI from the Department of Education is an interesting example of enormity of the task: “The provision of records to the Inter Departmental Committee to establish the facts of state interaction with the Magdalen Laundries took place over a period of six months. In the region of 1,700 hours were spent on the facilitation of these records by the Department’s staff, with some 5 staff involved in the process”. They refused my request because the scope was too big. Other Departments also asked that my FOI request be refined due to the volume of documents involved, and the request (if accepted) in some cases would cost more than the upper limit of fees of €700.

I did receive some material from the Department of Rural and Community Affairs under FOI which is very useful but was only a part of what I had requested

Having little success with FOI I looked at what records were available in public archives. I visited the Valuation Office in the Irish Life Centre where the rates and valuation archives are kept. I searched over 100 years of data for the Gloucester St/Sean McDermott St laundry and got copies of the records. I spent an afternoon there and only got through one laundry but very luckily met one of the archivists who was really helpful and over the next few weeks

she searched for the other laundries and sent me printed copies and pdf's of all the documents. Without her help it would have taken me a week to search for all the documents.

I spent two days in the Military Archives in Rathmines. The Department of Defence were one of the largest customers for laundry services and kept good records of the tendering process and the amounts of money paid to the laundries. The archivists there were really helpful and transferred files from Kildare for me. It is a very time consuming process to identify specific records relating to the Magdalene Laundries amongst thousands of other records. For example one particular file (Ref 3/77893) contained 247 sheets of paper and only 10 of them mentioned the Magdalene Laundries. It is frustrating to know these files have already been searched and copies of the relevant pages are in the IDC archive but we are denied access.

I also spent a day in the National Archives in Bishop Street to look at any files in the IDC Index that had a National Archive reference. I emailed in a list of the files before my visit and again I was lucky to have the assistance of one of the Senior Archivists there who told me that most of the files that I had asked for were "closed files" and I would need special permission from individual government departments to access them.

So, in conclusion, the task of trying to recreate the archive that the IDC relied on for its Report is, I believe, impossible without the resources and access that was given to McAleese and the Committee.

I have exhausted all avenues that are available to the public - through the National Archives, Valuation Office and the Military Archives.

A collection of copies of the State records relating to the Magdalene Laundries already exists in a dedicated archive. It is a huge waste of the resources, of researchers for JFMR and for government officials in each Department (through FOI), to try and reproduce a collection that is already sitting in the Department of An Taoiseach. Chapter 6 in the IDC report states that the dedicated archive will be "a resource for future research". It is my view that the Government should, with due consideration to sensitive and personal information, make this resource available to all who are interested.

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