SCAI witness statement

D Owen

1. I am the Director-General (DG) of the Royal Over-Seas League (ROSL). I was appointed in December 2017. ROSL welcomes the opportunity to take part in this inquiry and we have cooperated and will continue to cooperate in any way that we can. ROSL recognises the importance and significance of the Inquiry's work to victims and survivors.

2. I propose to make a few introductory remarks, outline briefly ROSL's involvement in child migration and to finish by updating the Inquiry on our response now.

3. ROSL itself has never run any institutions for the care of children and is committed to learning lessons from the past and participating in any process which will improve the safeguarding of children in the future.

4. ROSL's involvement in child migration was, I believe, carried out in good faith and was well-intentioned. It was genuinely believed that migration was in the best interests of the children concerned. That belief was widely held and shared by other agencies, including central governments. Child migration was a mainstream childcare practice supported by funding from both British and Commonwealth Governments. However, it was not uncontroversial and there is evidence in the expert report that significant concerns were raised post-war about these schemes and the welfare of the children who were part of them. It appears ROSL continued to support child migration in spite of these concerns until the 1970s.

5. I would like to begin by saying that until 2018 I was unaware of this appalling chapter in our national history and I was deeply shocked by the witness testimony given by former child migrants when I attended this Inquiry in December 2019 and by the research I have done on this subject.

6. I do not attend this Inquiry to defend in any way ROSL's role in these schemes which have been shown to be demonstrably wrong and harmful to the many thousands of children and young people who were caught up in them.

7. On behalf of ROSL, I accept completely the reality of the victims who have been brave enough to come forward to this and other Inquiries to tell their stories of immense cruelty and shameful abuse, including sexual abuse and indeed, secondary abuse in their subsequent treatment by official and non-official bodies.

8. The aim of ROSL now is to do everything in our power to help and support former child migrants and I will return to this at the end of this statement.

9. ROSL has been criticised strongly for its failure to keep records, especially of the Migration Committee, and this has been interpreted as symptomatic of a lack of care towards the children involved. Successive DGs have provided evidence to Inquiries and have struggled with the lack of records retained by ROSL relating to child migration. Our evidence has had to be put together from a number of sources and can only ever give a partial picture.

10. Our historic records do not contain reference to formal policies or procedures in relation to child migration and any formal records, such as those of the Migration Committee, no longer exist. There is no one currently within the organisation who has any direct knowledge of the schemes operated and/ or supported by ROSL up to the 1970's.

11. Our approach to providing evidence to the Scottish Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse (SCAI) has been to assume, perhaps wrongly, that all the material that was already in the public domain as a result of earlier inquiries was already available to this Inquiry and we have focussed on identifying material relevant to those whose care originated in Scotland. Due to our lack of records, this has been difficult. However, wherever possible we have extracted references to children who originated from Scotland and have also provided the Inquiry with a recently discovered photograph album which lists some of these children and, in some cases, their home towns, some in Scotland.

12. We have been grateful for the additional information provided by the expert advisors to SCAI, Professors Constantine, Lynch and Harper in their report and included relevant information from that report in our second submission to the Inquiry. We have relied heavily on their report for a better understanding of ROSL's involvement in child migration.

13. The history of ROSL's involvement in child migration has been detailed in the expert reports submitted to IICSA and SCAI. ROSL accepts that it played a major role in recruiting children for migration, particularly to New Zealand, and was an enthusiastic promoter of these schemes.

14. ROSL was founded in 1910 by Evelyn Wrench (later Sir Evelyn Wrench) and is a non-profit members' organisation dedicated to championing international friendship and understanding. ROSL is incorporated by Royal Charter and has a charitable arm known as the ROSL Golden Jubilee Trust (registered Charity no.306095). ROSL's membership stands at just over 13,000, 50% of whom live overseas, particularly in Australia and New Zealand.

15. ROSL's Charter and Bye-Laws direct the promotion of an enduring multi-racial fellowship pledged to the support of the Commonwealth and to the service of humanity at large. It endeavours to attain its objects by inter alia:
    a. fostering interest in the Commonwealth;
    b. maintaining social centres in London and at branches in the United Kingdom and overseas;
    c. encouraging the arts within the Commonwealth, particularly amongst young people;
    d. sponsoring and encouraging projects designed to assist those who are in need;
    e. publishing journals;
    f. holding social events and lectures and entertaining public men and women;
    g. co-operating with kindred societies working for the welfare of the Commonwealth.

16. It is clear that ROSL (before 1960, titled the Over-Seas League) supported child migration to New Zealand, Canada and Australia from the 1930s and into the 1970s continued to provide financial assistance to the Big Brother Scheme and the Fairbridge Society in Australia and the YMCA 'British Lads for Canada' Scheme.

17. ROSL gave evidence to the House of Commons Health Committee's Inquiry into the Welfare of Former British Child Migrants, whose Third Report was published in July 1998 and to IICSA (report published in 2018).

18. In 1926 a Mr Cyril Bavin (previously head of the YMCA in London) was appointed by the Central Council of ROSL as the League's Honorary Migration Secretary and a Migration Committee (later Bureau) was established, initially concerned with supporting and encouraging adult migration. ROSL branches began to sponsor child migrants to be sent to Fairbridge Farm schools in Australia, through a 'godparent' scheme from 1927 or 1929. ROSL branches in Scotland, as described in our Annual Reports, were involved in these projects. There was also financial support raised for young people being sent to Australia and Canada before and after the Second World War. During the war, ROSL was involved in schemes to evacuate UK children to the dominions and after the war, in assisting the return of some young wartime CORB evacuees who now wished to return. The expert report also points out that some of the children in these returning CORB parties organised by Bavin were not evacuees and that this was without the knowledge or approval of Australian or UK authorities.

19. After the Second World War these migration schemes to Australia and New Zealand continued and by an agreement with the New Zealand Government, ROSL was involved in selecting children, including some from Scotland, to go to

New Zealand under a fostering agreement. In conjunction with New Zealand House in London and after obtaining reports from the child's local authority area, a selection committee of representatives from ROSL, New Zealand House and other bodies selected the children for migration and fostering. A formal hearing before Bow Street magistrate's court was required, including questioning of the children involved to confirm their consent, before guardianship could be transferred to the Child Welfare Department in New Zealand. There has been no research we are aware of into the records of the Bow Street magistrate's court to verify this procedure.

20. Children departed following a ceremony at the League, attended by the New Zealand High Commissioner and Council Members of the League. Photographs of these events have recently come to light and been provided to the Inquiry. It seems that the League planned to maintain contact with these children, as each were made junior members of the League and the League's General Secretary in New Zealand was notified of their names and new addresses in New Zealand. On arrival in New Zealand the children became wards of the Superintendent of Child Welfare. However the relationship between local branches and the child migrants was not clearly defined and did not necessarily involve local ROSL members visiting individual children.

21. A further narrative of the initiation of the Scheme is to be found in the League Annual Report for 1949. The Annual Report for 1950 notes that 270 children had migrated under this scheme by the end of that year. The 1952 Report announces the imminent closure of the New Zealand Scheme and in 1953 the New Zealand Government decided to end this scheme, shortly after receiving a report detailing a series of shortcomings with the scheme.

22. The expert report to SCAI notes (P123) that in May 1948 the Home Office received reports from London County Council 'concerning evidence its officials had received that ROSL's selection of children for Australia, and prospectively for New Zealand, left much to be desired'. ROSL's involvement in child migration to Australia is difficult to piece together and the expert report notes that the League's proposals submitted in July 1948 were rejected in favour of 'aunts and uncles' schemes

23. It is not clear what systematic monitoring of the welfare and progress of these children was undertaken by ROSL although there are references to letters received from child migrants in the Annual Reports. It is perhaps not surprising that these always painted a very positive picture as part of promotional literature produced to encourage families to come forward for migration.

24. In 1953 the Report makes mention of the intent to maintain an Honorary Migration Secretary, "...as on account of the well-established place which the

League holds among the Emigration Societies in this country (Britain), it continues to receive many requests for advice re emigration...". Focus appears to have switched to Australia during that year and the League became a recruiting agency for organisations involved in migration to that country. It is also clear from this Annual Report that League branches, including some in Scotland, were involved in raising donations for the Fairbridge Society and continuing 'godparenting' schemes.

25. Through its participation in the Council of Voluntary Organisations for Child Emigration from 1951 – 1955 , ROSL's Migration Secretary, Cyril Bavin, must have been aware of concerns being raised about child migration as a practice, about the raised standards of child care being proposed (i.e. that children would receive the same standards of care as in the UK), that the needs of the child must come first and that 'each organisation undertakes to give continuous aftercare in accordance with its official obligations'.

26. It would seem that ROSL believed that it had passed on this duty, particularly in relation to the migration of children to New Zealand, to the New Zealand and other in-country authorities. Mr Bavin also appears to have ignored or been unaware of the negative reports coming out of Australia in particular about some of the receiving institutions in that country. Mr Bavin died in 1955.

27. In 1956, a strategic change is highlighted in the Annual Report; numbers applying to migrate had fallen and the League decided to switch its focus to family migration. Plans appear to have been made with the Fairbridge Society for this to occur at some stage after the end of the year. In 1957 it is clear that the Fairbridge Society had become the focus of most of the migration-related funding activity of the League. In this year there appears to have been family migration to Australia and there is also the first mention of the ROSL supporting the YMCA "British Lads for Canada" Scheme, which sought to settle older teenage boys in Canadian farms in conjunction with the United Church of Canada. In 1958, there is evidence also that these boys were specifically sponsored by the League, given membership and put in touch with the branch closest to them. Sponsorship continued in 1960, 1961. In the 1963 Annual Report, there is evidence that the League was also giving support to the Big Brother Movement in Australia, which was reported on further in 1964. Reporting is scant in the years 1965-67 and the Report for 1968 demonstrates that the level of support had not changed since 1964. Finally, the Reports for 1972, 1975 and 1978 continue to report on funding and other support for the Big Brother Scheme and the Fairbridge Society.

28. As far as I know ROSL itself has not received directly any allegations of abuse from former child migrants. ROSL staff know of no incidents of child abuse reported or alleged to them. However, ROSL accepts that whilst these reports

were not made directly to ROSL, former child migrants sent by ROSL have told their stories in other forums.

29. ROSL was aware through the media in the 1990s, of reports and investigations into child migration and allegations of abuse, including quotations taken from child migrants at that time.

30. ROSL was involved in the UK House of Commons Select Committee on Health inquiry into the welfare of former British migrants in 1997/8. ROSL gave evidence at that inquiry. ROSL was not involved in the Western Australia Select Committee Inquiry into Child Migration in 1996 nor has been involved with the ongoing Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. ROSL's Director General, Major General Roddy Porter, gave evidence to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse (IICSA) in 2016/7/8.

31. Turning to the IICSA report published in 2018, ROSL accepts that there was '***no proper monitoring, reporting and aftercare of children'*** sent by it to New Zealand and Australia principally.

32. In the matter of record-keeping, my colleague Margaret Adrian-Vallance will say more in her statement to this Inquiry about the history and challenges of record keeping at ROSL. There is no doubt that record keeping has been inadequate and focussed solely on a limited list of the papers of key committees, such as the Central Council, the Annual Reports and the Overseas Journal (the latter is also available via copyright libraries).

33. I believe and regret that all the papers relating to the Migration Committee have been lost and cannot speculate as to whether this was through carelessness or design. I accept that this might be interpreted as a sign of a lack of care towards former child migrants.

34. To rectify this situation as far as possible today, in 2019 we began the process of cataloguing and archiving the records we do have and ROSL is planning to invest in a major digitisation project so that these records can be readily searched and made available. We will be developing policies to enable this and will seek to work closely with the Child Migrants Trust.

35. Our policy is to provide all the information that we can to any former child migrant and / or their family to the best of our ability. For example, at the end of 2019 we were able to assist a former child migrant in establishing his claim for compensation from the UK Government's Department of Health and Social Care

36. ROSL has also been criticised by IICSA and others for failing to apologise to former child migrants for our involvement in these schemes. Our policy now is to

make such an apology to any former child migrant that contacts us, as indeed we did in regard to the recent case mentioned above. Our paucity of records makes it impossible for us to apologise to every child migrant with whom we were involved as we do not have their contact details.

37. In the context of SCAI, ROSL offers an unreserved apology to all former child migrants whose care originated in Scotland that ROSL was involved with.

38. On behalf of ROSL, I accept that it has been shown clearly in the experts' report that ROSL was more heavily involved in promoting and organising child migration than simply supporting official schemes.

39. ROSL recognises and accepts that child migration was capable of causing significant and irreversible damage to children who were migrated. The lifelong consequences for those involved are a matter of deep and sincere regret.

40. I am committed to ensuring that our archiving and digitisation programme has the priority and funding that it needs in order to ensure that ROSL will in future be able to provide former child migrants with access to our sources and support in tracing their personal stories.

Signed [redacted].

(Dr Diana Jane Owen)

24th May 2020