

Chapter 10: County Homes

Introduction

- 10.1 The unmarried mothers and children who were in county homes have attracted much less attention than those in the mother and baby homes but there is conclusive evidence that they experienced much worse physical conditions than the women who were in mother and baby homes, with the exception of Tuam and Kilrush. In addition, the women in county homes had to carry out onerous and unpleasant work for which they were not paid, sometimes for several years.
- 10.2 County homes were the successors to the workhouses established under the *Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1838* to provide indoor relief for all categories of poor and needy - the aged and infirm, destitute, homeless, tramps, and single mothers and their children. The policy outlined by the First Dáil and the Irish Free State was to abolish the workhouses, providing for those in need in the community where possible, and creating specialist institutions for those who required institutional care. A number of workhouses, renamed county homes, would accommodate the aged and infirm and those with disabilities. Unmarried mothers would be sent to homes that were exclusively for them; children would be placed in foster homes, though it was unclear where unmarried mothers of two or more children would be accommodated. Yet despite this intent - which was frequently reiterated - until the 1950s, the county homes continued to shelter the same disparate categories of adults and children as were found in Irish workhouses before 1919 including substantial numbers of unmarried mothers and their children and children without their mothers. In 1927 a former clerk of Baltinglass Poor Law Union told the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor that the county home was 'practically the workhouse in another name'.¹
- 10.3 The major change after independence was that services were organised on a county basis; the 19th century poor law unions ignored county boundaries. Most counties designated a former workhouse as the county home. Cork, the largest county, was divided into three health districts: north, west and south, with their three respective county homes, in Mallow, Clonakilty and Cork city.² There was no county home in Louth; the men, women and children who could elsewhere be

¹ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, ninth day, 15 July 1925.

² See chapter on Cork County Home, chapter 28.

accommodated in county homes were maintained in three district hospitals.³ The pre-1922 financial and governance structures survived almost unchanged. Health and welfare services were funded by rates - a local tax on land and property - and they were overseen by a county board of health, consisting of elected councillors and a number of co-opted members. With finance and governance locally-based, practices varied between the various health authorities. Affluent counties were not necessarily more generous in providing for the needy. When Ireland was part of the United Kingdom the Local Government Board Ireland, based in the Custom House, oversaw the poor law system; it established regulations that applied to all unions; carried out inspections; applied sanctions for failure to observe regulations, and it authorised loans to poor law unions for capital expenditure. This administrative system survived after independence, with the DLGPH replacing the poor law commissioners. The Irish poor law/welfare system continued to be governed by pre-independence legislation until 1942 when the *Public Assistance Act 1939* came into effect and which incorporated much of the earlier legislation (see Chapter 1)

Single mothers and children in county homes

- 10.4 A witness to the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor (the 1927 commission) estimated that, in 1925, 1,000 of the 1,662 'illegitimate' births took place in either a county home or a district hospital. Dublin was an exception; the majority of unmarried mothers did not give birth in a local authority institution; they gave birth either in the city maternity hospitals or in private maternity homes.⁴ The Dublin maternity hospitals appear to have been unusual in admitting unmarried mothers; elsewhere these women tended to be excluded from the main hospitals. Some women left the county home or district hospital with their baby shortly after the birth, others became long-term residents.
- 10.5 There were 772 unmarried mothers in county homes in 1926; 391 were mothers of two or more children. As the number of places in mother and baby homes increased during the 1930s, there was a gradual decline in the number in county homes. In 1939 there were 584 unmarried mothers in county homes; this fell to 582 in 1942 and to 450 by 1949. Unmarried mothers continued to be found in

³ Donnacha Seán Lucey, *The end of the Irish Poor Law? Welfare and healthcare reform in revolutionary and independent Ireland* (Manchester, 2015), p. 42.

⁴ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, seventh day, 25 June 1925.

county homes throughout the 1950s and occasionally in the early 1960s. On 31 December 1963 there were only three unmarried mothers in county homes - in Cashel and Midleton.⁵

- 10.6 During the 1920s and 1930s, the Department of Local Government and Public Health (DLGPH) inspectors made considerable efforts to have first-time mothers removed from county homes. In 1926 Miss Fitzgerald-Kenney urged the Kerry board of health and public assistance to send them to Bessborough because that would give the women a 'chance of reclamation'. The department issued a circular to all boards of health and public assistance in 1929, seeking information as to the number of unmarried mothers in county homes; local authorities were asked to submit those statistics on a six-monthly basis. The statistics were undoubtedly used to inform decisions about the need for additional places in special homes, and they enabled the department to monitor whether counties were implementing the policy of removing unmarried mothers from county homes. Donnacha Lucey documents a succession of letters to the Kerry board of health and public assistance in the early 1930s, all urging that unmarried mothers should be transferred from the county home to Bessborough. He describes the 'DLGPH's identification of women in county homes who it wanted sent to Bessborough' as 'thorough and systematic'.⁶
- 10.7 In the 1920s women from the South Cork board public assistance area, who were seeking admission to Bessborough, were first admitted to the Cork county home (which later became known as St Finbarr's), and until a maternity unit opened in Bessborough in 1930 most of the women gave birth in the county home and were then transferred to Bessborough. In 1930 the Mother Superior in Bessborough explained that many women refused to go to the county home before being transferred. She suggested that they should be admitted directly to Bessborough with a note from a home assistance officer, a local authority medical officer or the Bessborough medical officer. The South Cork board approved this arrangement for their area; women from other health areas would first have to enter the county home.⁷ In the early years South Cork paid for the maintenance of women from outside their area in Bessborough; in December 1930 they wrote to the minister

⁵ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/464099.

⁶ Lucey, *The end of the Irish Poor Law?* p. 96.

⁷ South Cork, Board of Health and Public Assistance, minutes, 26 Mar. 1930.

demanding that the cost should either be a national charge, or local authorities should pay.⁸

- 10.8 Women were likewise admitted to Pelletstown in the 1920s and early 1930s via the Dublin Union and many women gave birth in the Union (see Chapter 13). In the 1920s a pregnant woman or mother of a new-born infant who sought admittance to the Dublin Union was interrogated by the porter about her circumstances, including the identity of the putative father of her child.⁹ In the Donegal county home in Stranorlar the storekeeper was rewarded for investigating the personal circumstances of unmarried mothers and eliciting payments towards the maintenance of mother and child from either a putative father or her family.¹⁰ Some of the women admitted to special mother and baby homes were subject to similar inquisitions by their local authority.
- 10.9 Records from the war years show that PFIs (women who returned from England either pregnant, or with a new-born infant), were frequently admitted to the Dublin Union for a brief period before being transferred to a mother and baby home. When a mother and child left Bessborough or the other homes run by Congregation of the Sacred Hearts, her child was often sent to the county home prior to being boarded out. The records of the Kilkenny county home at Thomastown reveal many instances of children, who were born in Bessborough or Sean Ross and maintained there by Kilkenny board of health and public assistance, being transferred to the county home, prior to boarding out. If, however, the child had special needs or some physical ailment he/she might remain in the county home for many years, and children who had been placed in foster homes might be returned to the county home at a later date (see Chapter 11).
- 10.10 Local authorities appear to have distinguished between the women who were admitted to special mother and baby homes and those who remained in county homes, and this distinction was not just between first-time mothers and women who were pregnant for a second time. Lucey suggests that 'similar to pre-independence workhouses, county homes were utilised mostly by poorer women who were more knowledgeable of the poor law system'. By the 1930s Kerry board

⁸ South Cork, Board of Health and Public Assistance, minutes, 31 Dec. 1931.

⁹ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, fifth day, 23 June 1925.

¹⁰ 'Tirconail Central Home', *Donegal News*, 2 June 1923, 1.

of health and public assistance was maintaining women in Bessborough, including women from more comfortable families, who would not normally qualify for poor relief. 'While unmarried mothers in county homes were invariably poor, more middle-class individuals were willing to turn to mother and baby homes'.¹¹ The private (that is those owned and run by religious congregations such as Bessborough) mother and baby homes had the discretion to reject a woman or expel her from the home. In 1927, for example, the Sisters refused to re-admit a young woman who had recently left Bessborough in a fit of temper when asked to change sleeping apartments. The Sister reported that she had been 'very unsatisfactory, insubordinate, and from our experience of her misconduct we consider her of a very low type. Owing to such bad influence with the other girls we think it advisable not to admit her'. This young woman was in the South Cork Union.¹²

10.11 Local authorities had absolute discretion over whether they would pay for a mother and her child in a special mother and baby home. Women had no statutory entitlement to maintenance in a special home, and the files reveal some unseemly wrangles between different local authorities as to who was financially responsible for her maintenance. Some local authorities refused to send any women to special mother and baby homes, despite being repeatedly urged to do so by the DLGPH. In 1940, the department inspector Miss Litster reported that counties Kerry, Limerick, Roscommon, Louth and Wicklow refused to send any women to mother and baby homes 'except by special arrangement'. Women in Mayo and Galway were sent only to Tuam; counties Donegal, Sligo and Wexford did not as a rule send women to special homes.¹³ In 1947 the Roscommon county manager refused to pay for a pregnant woman who was returning from England to go to anywhere other than the county home - which she refused to enter.¹⁴

10.12 Until the 1950s, Pelletstown and Tuam, both under local authority control, and Bethany were the only mother and baby homes to admit mothers on a second or subsequent pregnancy, so most of these women had no alternative to the county home. For example, a woman whose first baby was born in Sean Ross was admitted to the Waterford county home on her second pregnancy.¹⁵ The mother

¹¹ Lucey, *The end of the Irish Poor Law?* p. 95.

¹² South Cork, Board of Health and Public Assistance, minutes, 3 Aug. 1927.

¹³ Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489391.

¹⁴ Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489984.

¹⁵ Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489989.

and baby home in Dunboyne, which opened in 1955 was initially designed to cater for mothers who were giving birth to a second or subsequent child. Women in bigamous marriages, widows and married women with extra-marital pregnancies were generally admitted to county homes, because they would not be accepted in the mother and baby homes. A file from the Department of Health concerns an Irishwoman whose English 'common law' husband was in prison. She and her four children were repatriated to a county home in Ireland.¹⁶

- 10.13 A woman's family background, her employment and intellectual and physical capacities appear to have commonly been considered when a local board of health or a county manager was determining whether to send a woman to a mother and baby home or a county home. A report by the DLGPH in 1944 noted that 'the mothers who go to County Homes are mainly drawn from the poorest class' and they generally had one or more children.

Such mothers, unless their parents are willing to keep them up to a short time before confinement, go to their County Home fairly early in pregnancy. In most County Homes they receive adequate and nourishing food and extra milk. There is no need for any attempt to conceal their condition, and in general girls of this class are more philosophic, more willing to accept consequences, as inevitable, than those drawn from a class where appearances count for a good deal. They have no anxiety about getting back to their work which is often of a casual nature.¹⁷

- 10.14 The attitudes reflected in this report influenced decisions as to where a particular pregnant woman would be sent. Women from poorer families who contacted charitable agencies catering for unmarried mothers, such as St Patrick's Guild, were commonly referred to a county home. Miss Cruice of St Patrick's Guild told the Commission on the relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor that she would assist 'a sensible girl who realises her fall and is anxious to regain her good name or to conceal the fact that she did fall...The other class of girl, the wanton girl, is mentally deficient. There is a slight mental deficiency in nearly every one of them. If I find that girl, a half lunatic in some cases...I try to send her to the Dublin Union'. She admitted that she would 'coax' 'girls' who lacked money to go into the Union.¹⁸

¹⁶ Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489986.

¹⁷ Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489773.

¹⁸ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, twelfth day, 22 Sept. 1925.

- 10.15 The county home was also the default institution for women who were rejected by the special homes, or transferred from these homes, because they had physical or intellectual disabilities, or they had contracted a venereal disease. One woman who was unable to walk - she was described as a 'cripple' - had been resident in Sean Ross before being sent to a Dublin maternity hospital to give birth (presumably for medical reasons). When she was discharged from hospital, Sean Ross refused to readmit her so she was sent to the county home - much to the distress of her family, who had several cousins who were 'inmates' in that county home.¹⁹ A 1949 report on the Wexford county home at Enniscorthy noted that there were two pregnant unmarried women in the home 'both regarded as sub-normal...The number of mothers coming within this category appears to be on the increase. This bodes ill for the average intelligence of children in the County Homes'. There are several references in inspection reports of county homes to unmarried mothers who had tuberculosis,²⁰ and there is some evidence that women with tuberculosis were excluded from special mother and baby homes.
- 10.16 In one case a county manager wrote to Miss Litster concerning an appropriate placement for a single mother. The woman's father owned a 50-acre farm. He commented
- Normally one would assume that a girl coming from such a home would be suitable for some of the special homes [i.e. mother and baby homes], but I do not think that the father is much use and the social and family background - apart from the mental stature of the girl - does not indicate that the case is one for such an institution.
- 10.17 He proposed that she be transferred to the county home, despite a clear policy from government at this time to remove unmarried mothers from county homes. There are similar examples of prejudicial judgements relating to women being repatriated from England during the 1940s and 1950s. The CPRSI determined that one woman was not suitable for a special home because she was 'incapable of thinking for herself', and suffered from 'nervous tensions', so she was sent to the county home in Killarney. A young woman, who it was claimed wanted to be admitted to Castlepollard but was described as a 'mental defective', was sent to

¹⁹ Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489984

²⁰ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/476463.

her county home in 1952. Another woman, who was described as 'handicapped', was admitted to the county home in Athy.²¹

- 10.18 Some women refused to go to their local county home because of fears that their pregnancy would become known to neighbours or family. By the 1940s a number of councils were making arrangements for women to be admitted in a different county. A married woman, who was separated from her husband and pregnant, was admitted to the Kilkenny county home in Thomastown rather than her local county home in Cashel. Another woman, who refused to go to the county home in Roscommon because she claimed that she had relatives working there, agreed to go to the Leitrim county home in Manorhamilton. She was eventually admitted to the Longford county home because Roscommon did not have a reciprocal arrangement with Leitrim. In another case, a Department of Health inspector tried to arrange that a woman who was chargeable to Louth would be admitted to another county home because she refused to enter any of the district hospitals in the county. This type of arrangement appears to have been initiated by the public assistance authorities in Donegal and Sligo; both counties had refused for many years to send women to special mother and baby homes. But in 1952 when the Department of Health queried why this arrangement was not being observed, an official in Sligo county council reported that all the unmarried mothers in the county home refused to go to Donegal because they wanted to stay close to family and friends. When one young woman, who was in an advanced state of pregnancy (her first child), was asked if she would go to another institution 'she became hysterical', and refused to leave the Sligo county home.²²

A number of women expressed a wish to be admitted to a county home rather than the special mother and baby homes. One woman asked for a transfer to her local county home - in Newcastle West - because she was unhappy in Castlepollard. In 1952 Miss Litster reported that first-time mothers were still being admitted to the county home in Killarney. It was claimed that some were unwilling to go to Bessborough because of 'fear of a lengthy period of detention or hope that, if they are in the County Home their relatives may take them and their babies home in a short time'.²³ On another occasion she commented that 'there is a good deal to be said for admission to this [Wicklow] County Home'; babies were boarded out earlier than in the special

²¹ Unless otherwise indicated all these cases, and those cited later in this chapter come from the repatriate files and files of women who approached the Department of Health seeking assistance. Details of these files are given in Part 5: Archives

²² Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/538765.

²³ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/447861.

homes, so the mothers were not detained for as long, and there were classes in domestic economy.²⁴

- 10.19 There was a wide variation in the length of time that mothers spent in county homes. Some remained for many years, but others left within a few days' of giving birth. Over 40% of women in the Donegal county home in Stranorlar were resident for less than 50 days in every decade (see Chapter 29A). A report by the DLGPH dating from the late 1940s noted that 'It is difficult to make any calculation as to the number of such [long-stay] cases. The attitude of parents towards the return of their daughter in such circumstances is not predictable, and while a large number may return home in one year from one institution, none may be permitted to do so in the following year'. It estimated that roughly 300 of the 1,000 children who survived infancy were taken home by their mothers - though it was unclear what arrangements were then made for their care. 'A number remain with their mothers in the County Homes and at a suitable age find their way to Industrial Schools generally through the good offices of the district inspector of the NSPCC'. This was usually done through a private arrangement between the child's mother and the NSPCC inspector and was not disclosed to the county home.²⁵

Physical conditions and diet

- 10.20 In 1949 the government established an inter-departmental committee to report to the Minister for Health on the reconstruction and replacement of the county homes. This report suggests that not much had changed since the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor had reported more than 20 years earlier. Although 5,208 of the 8,585 'inmates' nationwide were over 65 years or younger adults who were described as 'chronic sick', the remaining one-third included 'other adults': 'mental defectives', blind, deaf mutes, casuals and 450 unmarried mothers and 829 children.
- 10.21 This committee repeated the recommendation made in 1927 by the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor that county homes should be reserved for the aged and the chronic sick and should 'cease to be institutions housing a variety of persons for whom specialised accommodation is obviously more desirable'. The committee members recommended that unmarried mothers should be removed to special homes; additional special homes should be provided by

²⁴ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/430895.

²⁵ Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489778.

groups of counties and placed under the control of 'appropriate organisations specialising in the care of unmarried mothers and their children'. All children should be removed from county homes. The committee described boarding out as a 'reasonably satisfactory method of dealing with this problem', and recommended that it should be extended. Children for whom foster homes could not be found should be placed in industrial schools. Additional special homes should be established to accommodate children who were below the normal age for boarding out and for 'unmarried mothers for such time as it was found necessary for them to remain with their children and be maintained by the local authority'.²⁶ The committee made no reference to adoption.

10.22 During the 1950s the Department of Health kept up a sustained effort to have unmarried mothers and children removed from county homes. They monitored the statistical returns on numbers in county homes; department inspectors recorded personal details of the children and mothers in the county homes and there were frequent follow-up letters from the department, asking whether any action had been taken to remove named children (aged over two years) from a county home. It is important to recognise that county homes provided emergency accommodation for needy women and children. During the 1950s occupants included children whose parent(s) were being treated for tuberculosis in sanatoria; children and mothers with a parent(s) or spouse in a mental hospital, deserted wives and homeless families (Some of the women and children in the Tuam Children's Home had similar profiles). A 1953 inspection of the Kildare county home in Athy noted that 'This County Home generally has a fleeting population of families admitted because of eviction, unemployment, illness of one or both parents or some other cause of break in family life'.²⁷

10.23 Unmarried mothers continued to give birth in county homes during the 1950s. A Department of Health file dated 1952 lists maternity beds reserved for unmarried mothers in most county homes. Medical care was provided by the medical officer attached to the county home, though some counties were no longer delivering women in the county home - all Sligo women gave birth in the county hospital, likewise in Tipperary South, and Limerick. In Meath women gave birth in Trim

²⁶ Department of Health, *White paper on the reconstruction of county homes and improved care of the aged and other classes at present in county homes* (Dublin, 1951).

²⁷ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448082.

maternity hospital which was in the grounds of the county home.²⁸ Many women who gave birth in county homes left shortly after the birth. A report on the Wexford county home in 1951 noted that women were entering the home at a very late stage in pregnancy, sometimes after giving birth, and they were exiting the home at an earlier stage; 'many discharged mothers return with baby to their employment. No means of knowing type of care. At least the baby is in the mother's care'. Most single mothers in county homes were described as domestic servants or were working in the parental home. The inspector suggested that higher wages and better job prospects (an increasing number of young women were refusing to take jobs as domestic servants in Ireland) accounted for the late admissions and early discharges.²⁹

10.24 In 1952 the Department of Health issued instructions that 'If unmarried mothers are confined in county or district hospitals each mother and child should be discharged to the appropriate special homes at the end of the puerperium, approximately 30 days after delivery'.³⁰ Despite this instruction, single women continued to give birth in county homes until the early 1960s. There are references to children who were born in the Monaghan county home in Castleblaney in 1961, though on each occasion the mother and child left shortly after the birth.³¹ There were seven mothers - six single, one married - in the Limerick county home in Newcastle West in 1962. When the department challenged Miss Reidy, the inspector, to explain why the women had not been sent to special homes she reported that the special homes would be reluctant to accept most of the unmarried mothers who resort to county homes; many of these cases would have a bad moral influence on the usual 'inmates' of the special homes and she saw no alternative to accommodation being provided as required for such cases in county homes.³²

10.25 The department was not convinced by these arguments, because other local authorities were no longer admitting unmarried mothers to county homes. There was one unmarried mother in the Carlow county home in October 1963.³³ On 31 December 1963 unmarried mothers were found in only two county homes - Cashel (Tipperary South) and Midleton (Cork). The Department of Health noted that

²⁸ Department of Health, NATARCH/ARC/0/413869.

²⁹ Department of Health, NACT/INA/0/476463.

³⁰ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/443008.

³¹ Department of Health, NATARCH/ARC/0/409782.

³² Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/ 449398.

³³ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/425267

'anything approaching a "colony" of unmarried mothers in a county home is for all practical purposes now a thing of the past'. They conceded that 'It is unlikely, however, that admissions of unmarried mothers to county homes will cease entirely. Women far advanced in pregnancy or with some special reason of their own for not going to the special homes will occasionally look for and be granted accommodation in a county home'.³⁴

- 10.26 The reduction in the number of unmarried mothers giving birth in county homes was partly due to an expansion in the number of maternity beds in provincial Ireland. In the 1950s a number of county hospitals reserved specific numbers of beds for unmarried mothers, but that was not standard practice. Some county homes had provided maternity care for married as well as single women but that gradually ceased. In the early 1950s the Wicklow county home in Rathdrum appears to have been used by dispensary doctors as a 'dumping ground' for difficult maternity cases; complex paediatric cases were also sent to the county home without any prior notification - this practice reflected inadequate hospital facilities within the county and difficulties in having Wicklow cases admitted to Dublin hospitals. The maternity unit at the Wicklow county home closed in 1955 because the county medical officer was not satisfied with the quality of medical care.³⁵ Midwifery ceased in the Donegal county home in 1960.

Conditions in the Homes

- 10.27 All county homes were located in former workhouses. During the course of their investigations, the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, which reported in 1927, visited every county home. The majority were in very poor condition. Whether this reflects a lack of investment prior to 1920 or the fact that many of these institutions had been occupied by military forces - British forces, the Irish Free State army and the anti-treaty IRA - is not clear - but their poor condition is not in question. They concluded that the county homes were 'not fit and proper places' to accommodate their residents. They set out some basic essentials - 'good water supply and sanitary and bathing accommodation; well-ventilated wards, good beds, sufficient dormitory accommodation, good kitchen and laundry arrangements and possibly, above all a sympathetic and maternal administration'. They described the sanitary and bathing facilities, and the kitchen, laundry and day rooms in some homes as 'extraordinarily bad'. The wards needed improvement.

³⁴ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/464099.

³⁵ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/430895.

The county home in Cavan presented 'a cheerless appearance and everywhere looked gloomy and cold'. The accommodation provided for unmarried mothers and their children was 'only moderately good'. The West Cork county home in Clonakilty was 'one of the most primitive institutions in the country'; it was 'doubtful if it has been improved in any way since it was built. The walls are unplastered, the water supply is poor and the kitchen is not good. The sanitary accommodation is very bad'. This home contained 23 unmarried mothers and there were 55 children in the nursery. Some of the children, despite being of school age, were getting no schooling. There were 38 unmarried mothers in the Kilkenny county home in Thomastown; only eight were 'first offenders'. The water supply was 'bad', bathing and sanitary accommodation was 'very bad', and the standard of comfort 'from a home point of view poor, little effort being made to brighten the lives of the aged and infirm or to reform those who, through moral weakness, were obliged to seek shelter there'. The accommodation in the attached maternity department was 'insufficient' - and the inadequate water and sanitary services presumably included the maternity unit.

- 10.28 Thomastown had 41 children under three years, and 17 aged over three - these 58 children slept in 23 cots (see Chapter 30). In the case of the Laois county home the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor commented that it did not appear that 'any great effort had been made to justify the change in name from Workhouse to Home'; the accommodation in the attached maternity unit was 'not good'. The Leitrim county home at Manorhamilton had a low standard of comfort: 'the walls of the wards are not plastered; there is no bathing accommodation, and except for a flush closet in each of the yards, no sanitary accommodation. Except on the ground floor there is no method of heating any of the wards. The kitchen is poor and the laundry primitive'. The adjoining county hospital, which had a maternity unit attached, appears to have been better. The Longford county home 'has not yet advanced much beyond the poor standard of workhouse comfort' and the accommodation in the maternity department was 'not good'. The Meath county home in Trim was described as 'a gloomy depressing institution, indifferently managed...in no way changed, [from its days as a workhouse] except for the worse'. Pregnant women were sent to await confinement in a maternity hospital on a separate site. Some male and female 'inmates' in the Roscommon county home were sleeping two to a bed.

- 10.29 The seven school-going boys in the Tipperary South county home in Cashel attended an outside school, but they mixed with the male 'inmates' in the county home - which the 1927 Commission described as 'unsuitable'. Although the Cashel town water supply 'comes practically to the building' it was not connected to the county home, and bathing conditions were 'totally insufficient'. Female children were housed in a shed at the back of the home. There was a maternity ward - which presumably lacked proper water and sanitation. The water supply at the Donegal county home was 'bad'; there were no flush toilets in 'the body of the home and the contrivances in the yards are very bad and rather revolting'. Elderly women, 'lunatics', 'imbeciles' and unmarried women were all herded together. The home was fully occupied and occasionally overcrowded. Accommodation for unmarried mothers and their children in the Westmeath home was 'bad - the whole place wanting in comfort'; there was an attached maternity hospital. Accommodation in the Wexford county home at Enniscorthy was described as 'ample, but rough'.
- 10.30 In Carlow, Cavan, Cork North and South, Kildare, Kilkenny, Louis, Leitrim, Longford, Meath, Offaly, Tipperary South, Westmeath, Wexford and Wicklow there was some form of maternity unit attached to the county home. While some counties such as Westmeath admitted only unmarried mothers, others delivered the babies of both single and married women. It is not clear whether a qualified midwife or a doctor was in attendance. The Limerick county home at Newcastle West appears to have been among the best in the country. Considerable money had been spent; sanitary arrangements were described as 'good', there was a storage tank for water, 'a good kitchen, laundry, and engine house', presumably for heating the home. The former workhouse at Castleblayney, Co Monaghan, was being reconstructed and the commission expressed the belief that it would be 'suitable' when work was complete. The Offaly county home was located in the former Tullamore workhouse. While the premises had been improved and the commission described the management as 'good and sympathetic', sanitary and bathing arrangements 'should be improved'. The commission was not prepared to blame the local authorities for the poor condition of the homes, but it did state that 'a continuance of the present conditions would be a serious blot on the Schemes

adopted for the purpose of improving and humanising the administration of public assistance'.³⁶

10.31 There is no evidence of significant improvements to most county homes until the 1950s. Under the *Public Hospitals Act 1933*, the sections of county homes which were used as an infirmary were eligible to receive funding from the Hospitals Trust,³⁷ but the only such institution that was funded was St Kevin's Hospital in Dublin which was on the same grounds as the Dublin Union. By contrast there was significant capital investment from the Hospitals Trust in the mother and baby homes run by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts.

10.32 Waterford is one of the few county homes for which inspection reports survive for the 1930s. In February 1933 indoor lavatories and bath accommodation was 'lacking throughout the institution'. Nine wards had no ceilings - i.e. the rafters were exposed. Dust continually fell down, as did water when the floors in upstairs wards were being washed. The 'inmates' were segregated. Able-bodied women, who were almost exclusively unmarried mothers, had no dining room, or day room; the only space available to them for eating or any form of relaxation was their sleeping quarters. By 1934 there were hopes that the water supply to the home would soon improve.³⁸ There is no indication that Waterford was atypical. Some improvements were carried out during the 1930s; many county homes were connected to mains water supplies and mains electricity, and other minor works were carried out. The white paper on the reconstruction and improvement of county homes quoted the report of an inter-departmental committee established in 1949, which concluded that

while the buildings are sound and spacious, they are lacking in comfort and amenities. In general, the day rooms and dining rooms are cheerless and badly furnished. They are frequently unceiled and have unplastered walls. These factors combined with unsatisfactory lighting and rough bare floors render the atmosphere depressing.

There is considerable variation in the standard of the kitchens and cooking facilities. In some Homes the standard is very good, in others is it so low that the food, while originally of good quality, is unappetising when served.

³⁶ Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor including the Insane Poor, *Report (1927)*, Summary of principal conclusions and recommendations 4, 5, 6, and 7, p. 124.

³⁷ Hospitals Commission, *First Report*, p. 8.

³⁸ Department of Health INACT/INA/O 475469

The wards are large and commonly have unplastered walls, no ceilings, rough floors, poor beds and bedding, very few chairs or lockers and no dressing tables or mirrors. A number of the wards still have the original central valley or depression which served as a gangway when the inmates slept on straw spread on the raised portion of the floor at either side.

The narrow, steep stone stairways, which elderly and ailing people find difficulty in using, still survive in many Homes. In a number of Homes, however, efforts have been made to improve the staircases by covering them with wood. No County Home has a lift. Windows are generally too small and often have the original workhouse diamond panes and in general they are ineffective either for the provision of ventilation or light

Sanitary and bathing facilities are insufficient and are generally rather crude. Baths are the ordinary deep reclining type into and out of which helpless patients must be lifted, often with great difficulty. Supplies of running water, especially running hot water, are frequently insufficient. Sluice rooms are few. Central heating is a rarity and the standard of heating resulting from the single open fire in a large ward or room is usually quite inadequate. Quite often, too, the fires smoke, thus adding to the prevailing gloom...

The accommodation provided for unmarried mothers and children is, in general, equally unsatisfactory and in particular the committee reported that the environment of a County Home is most unsuitable for children. The nurseries are rough, poorly furnished and lacking in elementary playing facilities. In some County Homes proper segregation of children and adults is not possible.³⁹

- 10.33 Inspection reports confirm the account given above. The county home in Castleblaney was reported in 1926 to be undergoing major improvements. It is unclear whether they were carried out. In 1948 the floor in the day nursery which was used as a dining room for mothers and babies, was 'rotting in many places'; the open fire place was broken; plaster was peeling from the walls and one corner was very damp. The floor in the mothers' dormitory was also rotting and there were large holes along the skirting board and a rat trap under one bed. The nearby bath had not been useable for some months 'as the water cannot get away'; the water supply to the WC was described as 'all right, but the manhole

³⁹ Department of Health, *White paper on the reconstruction of county homes and improved care of the aged and other classes at present in county homes* (Dublin, 1951), pp 9-10.

outside is constantly getting choked' as it was when Miss Litster visited.⁴⁰ In 1952 the nursery in the North Cork county home was described as 'The usual long room on the ground floor opening directly off the yard. Conditions are primitive. No water is laid on. Hot water is brought from the laundry for bathing of babies. There is one WC in the yard. It is also used by the epileptic women. It is not as clean as it might be'.⁴¹ In 1949 the nursery in Enniscorthy contained 16 small and seven larger cots. The cots were described as in good condition, equipped with hair mattresses, but the blankets were worn, old and discoloured from use and washing. There was 'a stock of good new Foxford blankets' - but it is unclear whether they were being used. The nursery also contained five adult beds - two were occupied by mothers who slept there and attended to the children during the night; the others were occupied by 'casual' women: one bed had recently been occupied by a woman who had been brought in drunk by the Gardaí at 10pm.⁴²

10.34 Most nurseries were heated by an open fire - with a fire-guard (though there is at least one report where there was no fireguard); the open fire was used to heat milk for children's bottles in several homes.⁴³ Facilities for washing and feeding the infants varied. In Rathdrum (Wicklow) in 1952 there was a wash-room, which was described as 'dark', plus a large sink with hot and cold water but no WC or bath.⁴⁴ The Laois county home in Mountmellick had a bathroom beside the nursery, that was unused because it only had a cold water supply; babies were bathed in small baths beside the fire. Bath water was heated on the open fire. Given that there were children in the room, and this fire was also used to heat the children's milk, there must have been a considerable risk of accidents. Such arrangements raise serious questions about the cleaning of infants' feeding bottles. The only WC was outside in the yard, and it was adult-sized; children used chamber pots.⁴⁵

10.35 In 1948 the nursery in the Waterford county home was also used as a dining room for mothers and children; it was heated by an open fire. Food was brought from a kitchen 'some distance away'. 'A door opening from the nursery directly outside is badly fitting and rain and wind sweep in under the door'. There was no bathroom or indoor sanitary accommodation. When a Department of Health inspector visited

⁴⁰ Department of Health, NATARCH/ARCH/0/407915.

⁴¹ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/ 429074.

⁴² Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/466697.

⁴³ Department of Health, MHS/INA/0/490058.

⁴⁴ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/430895.

⁴⁵ Department of Health, MHS/INA/0/490058.

some months later, workmen were carrying out repairs that would address these complaints. However the cooking facilities for 260 people were still inadequate; the inspector recommended that a large cooker - Aga or Esse - should be installed without delay.⁴⁶

10.36 In the Limerick county home, as elsewhere, breastfed infants slept in the mothers' dormitory, other infants slept in the nursery - a room that was roughly 40 feet by 16 with 26 cots; those against the wall were close together with no space between them. A Department of Health inspector estimated that where a nursery was used day and night, '50 square feet may be regarded reasonably as minimum floor space per cot' - the space available was just under half that figure. An adjoining bathroom contained six small baby baths; water was heated in an old-fashioned boiler and then ladled into the baths. There were four outdoor WCs. The older children had access to a day room but the children did not appear to have any toys - except a toy horse on wheels 'from its appearance, [it] does not seem to have suffered by use'. The children were minded by a paid attendant - an elderly woman who was described as 'no doubt kind to them' but 'much too old to enter into play and organised games'. The older children slept in a separate dormitory. The mothers' dormitory contained 27 beds but only six were occupied at the time of this inspection. The walls were 'rough surfaced, painted green below and distempered in pink above'. There were two WCs and a wash basin off this dormitory but no mention of baths.⁴⁷

10.37 The first substantial investment in county homes commenced in the early 1950s when money was specifically allotted in the capital budget for this purpose. Between 1950 and 1952 the main passages in the Mountmellick home were laid with terrazzo flooring; the kitchen was provided with 'excellent cooking facilities; the dining room furnished with covered tables seating four to six adults with good solid chairs; a boiler in the kitchen supplying hot water to the men's bathroom'. The department's inspector described this as 'entirely laudable', before going on to note that 'The contrast with primitive conditions in the quarters allotted to mothers and children is pointed'.⁴⁸ Several inspections report that nurseries were recently painted, dormitories ceiled and walls plastered. In Wexford the children's dormitory was a 'large bright airy room, 18 beds, clean and comfortable'. There

⁴⁶ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/475557.

⁴⁷ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/430462.

⁴⁸ Department of Health, MHS/INA-0/490058.

was a bathroom off this dormitory with hot water. In 1952 the mothers' dormitory in the Wicklow county home contained 15 beds; good sheets and blankets, flock mattresses - which were seen as a major improvement on straw and similar mattresses. Each mother was provided with a locker - this seems to have been a recent improvement - and was uncommon in county homes at this time. There was a WC and bathroom off the 'old women's ward', which was presumably shared with the old women; and another WC and bathroom on the ground floor, plus five wash basins 'situated in the passage opening directly from outside, and an outdoors flush WC'.⁴⁹ A 1949 inspection which described identical sanitary facilities said that the hot water supply was 'ample' and 'there is no restriction on baths'.⁵⁰ Capital expenditure on county homes was reduced as part of the curbs on public spending resulting from an economic recession in 1956.⁵¹ In 1959 an official in the Department of Health commented that 'the greatest single need in any county home over four or five months of the year, having regard to the type of people accommodated is adequate heating'. This report described 'a circle of inmates huddled together round a fire'.⁵²

10.38 The investment in county homes was designed to create appropriate accommodation for the 'elderly' and 'infirm'. Unmarried mothers were not a priority. Inspectors' reports indicate that most unmarried mothers had no privacy or personal space. There is no indication that beds in mothers' dormitories were screened by curtains; in several instances there would not have been sufficient space between the beds. Many homes did not even provide women with a locker to store personal belongings. The lockers in the Kildare county home in Athy in 1952 had been made in the home - they were 'simply tables with a small drawer, closed by a wooden catch, sufficient to hold small personal belongings'.⁵³ Mothers in the county home in Killarney had to store personal belongings in a suitcase which was kept in a cloakroom. Miss Litster noted that there did not appear to be sufficient room in the dormitory for lockers or chairs.⁵⁴ In the Laois county home a four-bedded room contained chairs and a press, plus five cots where children, including one five-year-old boy slept. The two women who slept in the larger

⁴⁹ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/430895.

⁵⁰ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/430895.

⁵¹ Mary E. Daly, *The buffer state – the historical roots of the Department of the Environment* (Dublin, 1997), pp 434-7; see also Chapter 15.

⁵² Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/443008.

⁵³ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448082.

⁵⁴ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/447861.

children's dormitory, which contained ten cots, each had a chair and a locker.⁵⁵ Providing five wash-hand basins in a passage 'opening directly from outside' indicates a complete disregard for the women's privacy or dignity. Improvements continued throughout the decade. Donegal county home installed central heating in 1962, though by that time there were almost no unmarried mothers and few children in the home.⁵⁶

- 10.39 In the years following World War II efforts were made to provide play spaces or leisure activities for the children in county homes. In Enniscorthy in 1949, 20 toddlers and children used a 'shelter' in the playground which was heated by a stove. They came there in the morning and meals were served to them, seated on long benches. In Wicklow a recreation room with wireless, table, piano and comfortable chairs was available to the mothers after the babies' bedtime, until their own bedtime at 8.30 pm.⁵⁷ The dining room was being ceiled. Miss Litster commented that 'an attempt is being made in the County Home to provide some comfort and amenities for mothers'.⁵⁸

Diet

- 10.40 The diet of county homes, like the workhouse diet pre-1922, was carefully regulated and overseen by central authorities. In 1924 the diet in the Donegal county home for female patients, unmarried mothers and children consisted of

Breakfast, 8.00 am: 6 oz- bread, 1 oz margarine, 1 pint tea

Dinner, 1.00 pm: 4 oz beef or mutton, 2 lbs potatoes, vegetables

Evening Tea, 3.00 pm: 4 oz bread, 0.5 pint tea, 0.5 oz margarine

Supper, 1 pint porridge, 1 pint milk

- 10.41 The Minister for Local Government and Public Health deemed this diet to be excessive and administrators were ordered to bring it into line with other county homes. The local board of health and public assistance resisted this instruction for two years, but eventually complied. We have no record of the reduced dietary scale.⁵⁹ No further diet sheets survive until the mid-late 1940s. The inspectors appear to have been more interested in what the children ate, rather than their mothers' diet. By the late 1940s the Department of Health employed a resident

⁵⁵ Department of Health, MHS/INA/0/490058.

⁵⁶ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/434275.

⁵⁷ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/430895.

⁵⁸ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/430895.

⁵⁹ Donegal, Board of Health and Public Assistance, minutes, 19 Jan. 1925.

dietician, who advised on these matters, and inspection reports contain references to children receiving various vitamin supplements, such as cod liver oil, Abidec (vitamin drops), Parish's Food (an iron supplement) and Virol (malt extract).⁶⁰ The introduction of these supplements reflected greater awareness of dietary needs and key vitamins, which was reflected in the reports of the National Nutrition Survey.⁶¹ In 1947/48 Miss Litster reported that

Diets vary considerably. On the whole children are sufficiently nourished in County Homes. There is however, no variety in diet. In some Homes eggs are never given; fruit may be obtained by mothers and given to children but forms no part of regular diet. Tomatoes, prunes, lettuce are unheard of. Milk puddings are given occasionally in some Homes when cereals are available, in others not at all. Diet generally consists of porridge, bread and milk, mashed potatoes and butter or soup. Older children are probably given scraps from their mothers' plates and so add a haphazard variety to their diet.⁶²

- 10.42 In 1947 children in the Carlow county home aged from six months to three years were allocated 12 oz of bread and one quart (2 pints) of milk daily, 'No butter, eggs, meat or fruit appear on the dietary scale'; nursing mothers were given a child's allocation of milk but nothing extra. The medical officer had suggested that the diet should be improved. On the day of Miss Litster's inspection in 1951 the children's dinner consisted of peas, potatoes mashed with butter and soup made with meat and vegetables. She noted that a daily egg and minced vegetables had recently been added to their diets.⁶³ In one Louth district hospital in 1949, breakfast was served 'about 10.30', on the day of the inspection. It consisted of bread and milk or porridge and milk. The inspector was uncertain whether the late breakfast was due to a late delivery of milk or a late mass. The children might get an egg on a 'special day'. Dinner at 1.30 pm consisted of mashed potatoes with gravy or soup poured over. Sometimes they were given butter or eggs mixed through the potatoes; older children received 'a little meat'. Babies commencing a solid diet were given a milk pudding consisting of cornflour or sago. Milk pudding was not usually included in the older children's diet, and there was no fruit. Tea at 4 pm consisted of milky tea, bread, butter and jam; supper at 7 pm was porridge

⁶⁰ Department of Health, 475469

⁶¹ Department of Health, *National nutrition survey, Parts I–VII* (Dublin, 1948–53).

⁶² Department of Health, INACT/INA/O/474129.

⁶³ Department of Health, INACT/INA/O/425267

and milk - with unlimited supplies of milk. Bottle-fed infants were fed at four-hourly intervals.⁶⁴

- 10.43 Diet sheets for the Waterford county home in 1951 showed that able-bodied women received 6 oz of bread, $\frac{3}{4}$ oz of butter and a pint of tea every day. Working 'inmates' also got either an egg or 8 oz of porridge for breakfast, and two eggs, 6 oz jam or 4 oz of cheese, or liver or 6 oz of fish at their evening meal. Another report suggested that the only means of cooking liver was on an open fire. Dinners consisted of 1.5 lbs of potatoes and $\frac{1}{2}$ lb of vegetables daily plus 6 oz of bacon, beef or a pint of stew, in which case no separate potatoes or vegetables were served. Friday's dinner seemed very austere, consisting of eggs, bread and butter. Breastfeeding mothers and children were given milk mid-morning, and breastfeeding mothers were allocated two pints of milk a day.⁶⁵
- 10.44 In 1952 the children in the Limerick county home had breakfast at 8 am, consisting of porridge and milk, one egg daily, generally soft boiled plus bread, butter and tea. Dinner at 12.30 pm consisted of potato and 2 oz minced meat; vegetables in season, milk to drink. Soup was not generally given. Tea, at 4.30 pm, was bread and a milk 'goody' or bread, butter and milk or tea. They were given daily doses of cod liver oil, and Virol and Parish's Food when required; orange juice for infants; oranges were sometimes given to the older children.⁶⁶
- 10.45 The diet in county homes up to and during the Emergency was almost certainly deficient in key nutrients, but the post-war improvements and the introduction of dietary supplements probably ensured that the diet, though boring, was adequate. It probably compared well with the diets of larger families of small farmers/labourers and unskilled workers in cities and towns.

Work carried out by unmarried mothers in county homes

- 10.46 Requiring able-bodied 'inmates' to work without pay was a core principle behind the 19th century workhouses - hence the name - and this principle survived into the 20th century. A man who worked in an English workhouse from 1924, when asked about unmarried mothers, recalled that

⁶⁴ National Archives of Ireland, HLTH/A20/47

⁶⁵ Department of Health INACT/INA/O 475469

⁶⁶ Department of Health, INACT/INA/O/449398

The ladies came...into the workhouse and did domestic work, cleaning up and washing and they did that until such time as the baby was due and then they were moved into another section to have the baby. Whilst they were with the baby and providing they were feeding the baby they stayed there looking after the babies in the nursery. They came back again, if they had nowhere to go, back into the workhouse to do ordinary domestic work.⁶⁷

- 10.47 In Ireland, many of the pre-independence workhouse regulations continued after independence, and they were often incorporated into revised legislation, so able-bodied 'inmates' of county homes - a category that included unmarried mothers - were required to work. Section 25 of the *Public Assistance Act 1939* stated that

A public assistance authority may, as a condition of the granting of general assistance to a person, require such person, either before or after or during receipt of such general assistance, to perform such work as such authority shall consider suitable to that sex, age, strength and capacity of such person and shall direct such person so to perform.

- 10.48 There appears to have been no effort to conceal the extent of unpaid work carried out by unmarried mothers in county homes. A representative of the Mayo board of health told the Commission on Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor that, while he agreed in principle that first-time unmarried mothers should be sent to special mother and baby homes,

I think the financial conditions of the County do not permit. I do not agree with the suggestion that all unmarried mothers should be removed to a Central or Provincial Home except as regards second offenders. The reason for my forming this opinion is, there is not very much difference for the moment, I cannot see any advantage having this class under a religious order in a Central Home when they can be left in charge of a religious order in the ordinary County Home doing useful work. Their removal would mean the employment of several extra wardsmaids which would be very difficult to procure. If it were possible to employ them it would be at great extra expense to the Ratepayers.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Roberts Archive, as quoted in Jenny Keating, *A child for keeps. The history of adoption in England, 1918-45* (London, 2009), p. 31.

⁶⁸ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, twenty-fourth day, 20 Jan. 1926.

- 10.49 The record of an inspection of the Waterford county home in the early 1930s noted under the heading of rehabilitation that unmarried mothers received ‘lectures from nuns’.⁶⁹
- 10.50 Although the 1927 commission recommended that first-time unmarried mothers should be removed from county homes, they qualified that recommendation:
 There is in each County Home a good deal of work, such as is done by wardsmails, that would afford useful employment for some of the women who would be received into the special institutions. We would see no objection to such women as the Matron considers suitable being transferred to the County Home for the purpose of assisting in the work of cleaning, etc.⁷⁰
- 10.51 The organisation, financing and running of a county home was determined by the local authority and funding came from local taxes. The value of the unpaid labour carried out by unmarried mothers remained a key consideration in the decisions made by local authorities on sending women to special mother and baby homes or keeping them in the county home.⁷¹ In 1931 Tipperary South board of health and public assistance estimated that the weekly cost of a mother and baby in the county home was 6s each, which was roughly half the cost of maintaining them in a mother and baby home.⁷² The significantly lower cost reflects the inferior conditions in a county home plus the value of the unpaid work performed by the mothers.
- 10.52 Draft material prepared in 1940 for the Annual Report of the DLGPH noted that ‘In general laundry work, scrubbing and polishing of floors, kitchen work, wardswail work etc. is done by the mothers who are inmates of the institution. Whether adequate time is permitted to mothers for attention to their infants or proper supervision received over cleanliness and comfort of cradles, cots or nurseries or over preparation of foods for bottle-fed infants varies considerably with the institution. Conditions for mothers and babies in some of our County Homes are bad’.⁷³

⁶⁹ Department of Health INACT/INA/O 475469

⁷⁰ Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor including the Insane Poor, *Report* (1927), para. 235.

⁷¹ Department of Health, INACT/INA/O/430462.

⁷² *Nenagh Guardian*, 25 July 1931.

⁷³ Department of Health, RM/ARC/O/489391.

10.53 While the women in mother and baby homes also carried out unpaid work, it is important to distinguish between the respective workloads. In July 1925 there were 287 residents in the Donegal county home, including 33 infants under three years, 21 older children and 39 unmarried mothers. The infants and children needed care and attention, as did the 194 other adults - many of them elderly and infirm, or with special physical and mental needs.⁷⁴ The 39 unmarried mothers were responsible for caring for 194 adults and 54 children, and for the cooking and cleaning in the county home. Much of that work was physically difficult, and often unpleasant. Facilities were primitive, with no hot water on tap and inadequate/non-existent toilets, bathing and laundry facilities. Comparable duties in a mother and baby home were shared between a much larger cohort of women, and their work did not include providing personal care or doing the laundry for elderly, infirm, or/and handicapped adults. The homes run by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts were reconstructed in the 1920s and 1930s to cater for their new function as mother and baby homes and they had much superior heating, cooking, laundry and sanitary facilities, plus proper floors (this is not to say that conditions were ideal). While some women in special mother and baby homes may have taken part in farming, market gardening and saving turf, no mother and baby home inflicted a workload on the mothers comparable to that in county homes.

10.54 Evidence about the mothers' work in county homes is scanty and often incidental. It can be assumed that in the 1920s all the unskilled work was done by the able-bodied 'inmates'; outdoor work was carried out by able-bodied men. Although the county homes were subject to regular departmental inspections, almost none of these reports survive before the 1950s. In November 1950, Miss Litster reported on her inspection of the Wexford county home in Enniscorthy that 'The mothers do most of the domestic work in the institution. They are not as a rule employed in the kitchen. A large part of the work allotted to them is in the laundry, where conditions are not good'.⁷⁵ There were no paid domestic staff in Mountmellick during an inspection in February 1952 - the mothers carried out all the laundry and domestic work.⁷⁶ When the county home in Athy was inspected in September 1952 Miss Litster reported that

The mothers do the household work. There appears to be three or four women, not all unmarried mothers, working daily in the laundry under the

⁷⁴ Donegal, Board of Health and Public Assistance Minutes, 20 July 1925

⁷⁵ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/476463.

⁷⁶ Department of Health, MHS/INA/0/490058.

supervision of an older woman. None are paid workers. The washing for the whole institution is done here. Many begin work about 10 a.m., have a break at about 11.30 and have tea, dinner 1 to 2 o'clock generally. They finish about 5.30 pm or may wash babies' napkins later than that. There is no washing machine. The provision of a washing machine would lessen their labour. The matron complains of the difficulty of getting good work from the mothers. What surprises me is that, in the conditions in which they have to work, they do not rebel. It is not a question of each mother washing her own children's clothing. Clothing for all children must be washed, sheets and often blankets from all dormitories, wards and cots: this daily unpaid and without holidays.

Other mothers work as ward attendants, nursery attendants and one looks after the nurses.

There are in the Home women admitted as unmarried mothers whose children have been boarded-out. They are employed according to their capacity but not paid. It would be an incentive to work and a deterrent to their leaving if they could be given some remuneration for their work. Article 38 of Gen. Regulations state definitely that no inmate shall receive any remuneration for work. Elsewhere this is got over by a technical discharge as inmate and readmission as paid staff.⁷⁷

- 10.55 There is evidence that the Kildare local authority objected to this report, though their letter is not on the file. A handwritten note by an official in the Department of Health dismissed most of their response as 'entirely irrelevant' and went on to note that 'The Inspector did not criticise the facilities provided in the Hospital, but the conditions in which the unmarried mothers live there, with particular reference to long hours and unpaid labour. The matter has been studiously avoided in the letter'.⁷⁸ The most damning evidence of the draconian work regime in Athy is given in Miss Litster's observations of one nine-week-old infant:

Appears healthy, clean and well cared for. She was however, lying in her cradle with a half emptied bottle of milk beside her. I suggested to her mother in the presence of Matron and the nurses that she should be lap-fed and not put into her cradle until she had finished the feed. The excuse she gave was that she would never get her work done if she had to spend so much time feeding the baby. This is not an isolated case by any means. It is mentioned

⁷⁷ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448082.

⁷⁸ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448082.

as being significant in the relative importance of the welfare of infants and the domestic work of the institution *even in the view of the mothers*.⁷⁹

10.56 By contrast she described the Wicklow county home in Rathdrum, 'as one of the few homes where unmarried mothers were treated like human beings'. In 1952 there were ten paid employees, 'in addition to the mothers'. Mothers whose children had been boarded out were expected to remain in the home, carrying out unpaid work, for two years after giving birth - this also appears to have been common practice in other county homes. Wicklow babies were generally boarded out at the age of nine months. In the late 1940s classes were organised in this county home on three days of the week, given by domestic economy instructresses, who taught cookery and needlework. The classes were designed to give mothers skills that would help them to find work when they were discharged - this was at a time when domestic or institutional service was the largest source of paid employment for Irish women. Miss Litster noted that the classes had not resumed in 1952. She was told that they could not encourage enough mothers to enrol, but her account suggests another explanation:

It is possible that the inevitable disruption of routine in the Home by the holding of these classes has led to discouragement of the girls from attendance. Also, the labour of girls attending the classes is necessarily withdrawn from work in the institution for about 3 hours a day for three days weekly. It is merely of course a surmise on my part that failure to recommend classes may not be altogether the fault of the girls'.⁸⁰

10.57 While the regulations specified that the 'inmates' should work without pay, a number of local authorities appear to have circumvented that rule. The paid staff of the county home and hospital in Cork city included a number of unmarried mothers whose children had been boarded out. When the South Cork board of public assistance decided that these mothers should be asked to contribute towards their children's upkeep the matron objected: 'They have but 15/- a week and rations and a claim of the nature suggested would leave them with little more than 9/- a week for which they are unwilling to work'. She described them as 'very good girls' who carried out 'important duties'.⁸¹ The proposal to deduct payments

⁷⁹ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448082.

⁸⁰ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/430895.

⁸¹ South Cork, Board of Health and Public Assistance, minutes, 28 Feb. 1938, 28 March 1938.

was dropped. In this, as in other aspects of health and welfare at this time, practices varied between counties. County Meath operated a punitive regime. If an unmarried mother, whose child(ren) had been boarded out, determined to leave the county home, her child(ren) were removed from their foster home and presented to her, making her responsible for the upkeep. Some mothers placed their children at nurse.⁸² The practice was similar in Wexford.

10.58 When the *Health Bill 1952* (which became the *Health Act 1953* - see Chapter 1) was going through the committee stage in Dáil Éireann, Deputy Noël Browne (a former Minister for Health) moved an amendment, which was accepted by Minister for Health James Ryan, to delete a subsection that retained a requirement from the *Public Assistance Act 1939* that those in receipt of general assistance should carry out unpaid work. During the course of the debate, Deputy Jack McQuillan argued that by allowing that subsection to be included in the legislation 'we are condoning a system of slave labour. Whether that is to last for a long or a short period, we cannot say'. He argued that 'if unmarried mothers have to work in these institutions and are asked to work they should be paid for it'. Ironically most of the contributors to the Dáil debate on this topic referred to 'he', rather than 'she'.⁸³ Deputy Kyne (Labour) noted that whereas casual men were no longer required to break stones before getting their breakfast, unmarried mothers were still 'kept in and made wash filthy linen and made do the most menial tasks...we put them to carry out some of the most menial tasks, made to do unnecessary work sometimes, just maybe as a lesson to them not to come in again'. Dr ffrench-O'Carroll TD stated that unmarried mothers were 'maintained in an institution and, as part of the return for the maintenance and treatment which they got, were obliged to give certain domestic services for a period of a year or two years, apparently without any remuneration'. The minister tried to play down the type of work demanded of women in the county homes. He claimed that they were only asked to do work which was suitable for their age, sex, strength and capacity. He suggested that local authorities were now employing people

from outside...in the laundries, in the cook-house, in the kitchen, where they had not got them some years ago. . . .

Up to some years ago-maybe up to recently, in some cases - they had the unmarried mothers to do a lot of that work, laundry work and kitchen work.

⁸² Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489697. This was in the 1940s.

⁸³ Pressure to end unpaid work came from trade unions who objected to male 'inmates' of the Dublin Union carrying out unpaid work.

That has disappeared from some institutions and even where it is left they are not doing as much of that type of work as they were doing before.

- 10.59 Deputy McQuillan countered that by permitting local authorities to make these women work without payment ‘we are giving an example to private institutions to make things even worse for the girls in these institutions because they can point to the example set by local authorities and say that the power has been given by this house’. He referred to institutions ‘where unmarried mothers from the day they go in until they die are not allowed out’, which is an obvious reference to the Magdalen laundries.⁸⁴
- 10.60 The inspection reports on county homes are incomplete, and not all give information about work practices and staffing, so it is not possible to determine when the practice of requiring mothers in county homes to carry out unpaid work ended. In September 1953 however, a letter was sent to the secretary of Kerry county council on behalf of the Minister of Health, stating that ‘he is seriously concerned to learn that unmarried mothers who should be accommodated in special homes are being retained in the County Home on the grounds that their removal would necessitate the employment of additional attendants...In the Minister’s view it is inexcusable that girls, who as stated in your letter could have been sent to any of the three Special Homes should be kept in the County Home’.⁸⁵ A memorandum dating from the early 1960s claimed that ‘The Health Act, 1953, repealed, inter alia, the provisions of the Public Assistance Act, 1939, which related to the giving of institutional assistance. No inmate of a county home therefore can now be required to work’. In 1962 however unmarried mothers were still carrying out work without pay in the Limerick county home in Newcastle West.⁸⁶

Children

- 10.61 An undated memorandum by Miss Litster, which was probably written in 1947/48 stated that

The care given to children in County Homes varies considerably. It is customary to find that all the domestic work, laundry etc. is carried out by the labour, unpaid except by maintenance, of the mothers.

⁸⁴ Dáil Éireann, 14 July 1953

⁸⁵ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/447861.

⁸⁶ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/449398; INACT/INA/0/464099.

Under the supervision of an enlightened and liberally-minded Matron, mothers are encouraged in breast-feeding and given ample time for nursing and care of their infants. The case may be far otherwise where the Matron is a stern disciplinarian, more concerned with the efficient running of the institution than with the case of infants.

- 10.62 The regime presented serious health risks for infants who were not breastfed. County homes did not have refrigerators until at least the 1950s. In 1947/48 milk was commonly stored 'in airless cupboards in nurseries used days and night, or in vessels left uncovered on tables or window-sills. The cleaning of feeding-bottles, preparation of feeds etc. is usually done by the mothers. Milk is generally heated on an open fire'.⁸⁷ An inspection of the Waterford county home in 1951 reported that 'the milk food for the children were mixed in a not too clean mug and given from unboiled bottles'.⁸⁸
- 10.63 Babies slept with their mothers in most county homes, either in the same bed or in cots that were brought to the mothers' dormitory at night. Boys of school-going age generally slept in the men's ward - a practice that carried potential risks for the children, apart from the fact that it gave no recognition to children's needs. A report on Roscommon county home in November 1943 noted that there were 23 children in the home; eight were suitable for boarding out. The nursery was overcrowded and three children had to be accommodated elsewhere - two brothers, aged six and three, slept in the female 'mental ward' and one seven-year-old boy slept in the men's ward. Two children were described as 'mentally defective' and 'a deaf mute'.⁸⁹ The county home in Kildare had a separate nursery in 1952, but this had disappeared by 1954 and the 24 children - whose ages ranged up to their early teens - were scattered throughout various dormitories.⁹⁰ In the Laois county home in Mountmellick, five-year-old boys were sleeping in the men's dormitory and girls of that age slept on the women's side. Miss Litster expressed concerns about the sleeping arrangements for the boys:

There are doubtless good and kindly old men on the male side. There are doubtless also the degenerates and the sub-normal. Much of the language and behaviour heard and witnessed by an impressionable child cannot be worthy of his imitation. Is it to be wondered at that the language used by

⁸⁷ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/474129.

⁸⁸ Department of Health, INACT/INA/O/ 475469

⁸⁹ Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489727.

⁹⁰ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448082.

children boarded out directly from County Homes is often such as to horrify country folk not for the most part unaccustomed to bad language?⁹¹

- 10.64 One might suggest that Miss Litster should have been more concerned about other aspects of these sleeping arrangements, and less concerned about the possibility that the children might learn 'bad language'. In Mayo most mothers and children who sought public assistance were sent to Tuam, but a small number of children who were awaiting medical treatment, transfer to Tuam or boarding out, were in the county home. As there was no nursery the children slept in the adult wards, mainly sharing a dormitory with infirm and elderly women.⁹²
- 10.65 A mother could not leave the county home without her child. There was no law preventing a mother from leaving, provided that she took her child.⁹³ The poor law regulation stipulating that 'every woman shall be liable to maintain such of her children, whether legitimate or illegitimate, as are for the time being under the age of sixteen years' was restated in the *Public Assistance Act 1939*. (It remains the law that parents are liable to maintain their children.) The Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor noted that in Kerry it was the practice to refuse to discharge unmarried mothers with their children for a period of three years, despite the fact that the local authority lacked the statutory power to enforce this 'at present'.
- 10.66 The children in county homes included those who were born there; children admitted with their mother shortly after birth; children transferred from another institution; and children who had been living either with their parent(s) or were nursed out/boarded out and ended up in the county home for various reasons. The county home was the catch-all place for women and children who had nowhere to go. There were children of married couples, those with serious medical needs, children whose parent(s) were sick, in prison or had abandoned them; children who were being cared for by a grandparent, aunt or other family member who had died or become incapacitated and could no longer cope and children who were returned or rejected by a foster parent.

⁹¹ Department of Health, MHS/INA/0/490058.

⁹² Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/451522.

⁹³ Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor including the Destitute Poor, *Report* (1927), para. 125.

- 10.67 In Cork, it appears to have been standard practice to transfer children from Bessborough to the county home prior to boarding out, and this also happened in Kilkenny and in other counties. A review, carried out in 1937 by the South Cork board of public assistance, of children placed at nurse by the Catholic Women's Aid Society showed that many had been placed with foster mothers whose sole source of income was public assistance. The Catholic Women's Aid Society paid these foster mothers for the upkeep of children for three or four years (this money had been given to the Catholic Women's Aid Society by the child's mother or a family member), after which time payments ceased and the foster parent was expected to 'adopt' the child. Many foster mothers could not afford to maintain these children, so they sent them to the county home. The Cork health authority issued instructions to the Catholic Women's Aid Society that children should not be placed with foster mothers whose sole source of income was home assistance and the fee paid for maintaining the child.⁹⁴
- 10.68 The county home was often the revolving door for children of unmarried mothers. Children who were rejected by a foster parent or had to be removed from a foster home for some reason were taken to the county home, sometimes as a short-term arrangement pending their transfer to an industrial school or another foster home, but some children remained in the county home for long periods. There are records of children who were long-term residents in county homes attending a local national school.
- 10.69 In 1946 Miss Litster noted that public assistance authorities were reluctant to admit children who were not accompanied by their mothers - and might refuse to do so. 'There does not appear to be any legal authority for refusal to admit infants unaccompanied by their mothers, provided they are destitute'. She described the public assistance authorities' reluctance as
- understandable. In few of the County Homes is there any provision for care of motherless infants and the PAA find it more difficult to procure suitable foster homes for infants than for older children. If infants were to be admitted to County Homes in any great numbers unaccompanied by their mothers, a properly equipped and staffed nursery would require to be provided in each institution. The care of infants as well as the general work of County Homes is as a result carried out by the mothers who are maintained there. They are

⁹⁴ South Cork, Board of Health and Public Assistance, minutes, 26 July 1937, 17 Sept. 1937.

for the most part unwilling to give attention to any child other than their own, and the motherless child is liable to neglect.⁹⁵

- 10.70 In 1952 seven of 17 children in the Wicklow county home were without their mothers; in Killarney seven of the 19 children aged from one to five were without their mothers. An inspection report from 1952 noted that 20 of the 34 children in the Kildare county home 'are members of families admitted because of failure to procure accommodation or other temporary cessation of home life. This is such a frequent occurrence in the Home that it is regarded as part of the pattern of normal population'. The 1953 inspection commented on the presence of five siblings, whose ages ranged from two to 11 years. Their mother was being treated for TB in a sanatorium; their father visited them occasionally. Miss Litster suggested that it should be possible to give the family financial support to hire a housekeeper under the TB scheme, which would enable the children to remain in their home.⁹⁶
- 10.71 Another family of four children were in the Kildare county home in 1952; they had been evicted from their home when their father deserted his family. They were still in the county home in 1954, when the older children were 14 and 12 years old; a third child was being treated for suspected TB in a sanatorium. Despite repeated pressure from the Department of Health and promises by the local authority to find them a house, the family was still in the county home in 1955. By 1958, as a result of sustained pressure from the department the number of children in the Kildare county home had fallen to eight; six were the children of single mothers, the remaining two had serious medical problems.
- 10.72 There were 37 children in the Limerick county home in 1952, whose ages ranged from three months to six years; the two children aged over four years were blind and suffering from intellectual disabilities. There were 24 mothers with children in the home (several had two children in the home); three expectant women; and 17 women without children, who had originally been admitted as unmarried mothers but who were retained as unpaid workers and whose children were either boarded out or in institutions. Approximately 40% of the children in the nursery were breastfed.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Department of Health, CCL/INA/0/478958.

⁹⁶ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448082.

⁹⁷ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/449398.

- 10.73 Little information is available about the extent of contact between mothers and their children in county homes once they were no longer babies. Mothers in the North Cork county home were described as
- not over-worked. They are given occasional domestic work but have ample time to devote to the care of their children. The children are kept clean and comfortable, but they are quite obviously receiving no training, nor is there any attempt at training the mothers in mothercraft. It requires patience to teach a child to eat from a spoon and to drink from a cup.
- 10.74 Miss Litster described the fact that children in this home were still using a bottle up to three years of age as 'laziness'.⁹⁸ She reported that in Donegal
- Mothers of babies not breast-fed and of older children sleep in the main body of the County Home and work there. They are allowed no freedom of access to their children. On their 'day off' Sundays they may visit their children and if the children are ill they are allowed special visits. It is stated that more frequent visits cause disruption of routine, quarrelling and a general upsetting of the children. There is under this system no fostering of affection for and interest in their children. On the other hand, if we have nothing to offer the mother eventually but complete separation from her child, it is perhaps kinder to avoid the growth of affection. Nevertheless we may have to consider whether or not the loss of maternal care may have some share in the mounting death rate.⁹⁹
- 10.75 The age range of children in county homes varied widely. Some counties made serious efforts to place children with foster families at a relatively early age. In 1951/2 the youngest Wicklow child boarded out was 14 months old. The inspector noted that in the past children were placed in foster home when they were under a year, but it was becoming more difficult to find foster parents who were willing to take very young children, though the local authority made great efforts to do so.¹⁰⁰ But in North Cork in the same year, Miss Litster reported that 'children of suitable age are generally committed to industrial schools from the institution. The Matron informs me that she may send for the N.S.P.C.C. inspector who interviews the mother and makes the necessary arrangements for committal'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/429074.

⁹⁹ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/434275.

¹⁰⁰ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/430895.

¹⁰¹ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/429074.

- 10.76 Although the number of children in county homes declined during the 1950s, they proved to be a more permanent presence than the mothers. Following the introduction of the *Adoption Act 1952*, most long-stay children in county homes had some physical or intellectual disability, which meant that they were regarded as unsuitable for adoption or fostering. In some cases the mothers refused to agree to adoption or boarding out, though many of those children who were not placed for adoption ended up in industrial schools. Some children who spent long periods in a county home had quite minor problems. A report on the Killarney county home in 1952 identified one five-year-old boy who was 'a bed-wetter and for that reason unsuited at present to boarding out, unless the foster-mother were warned about the habit'.¹⁰² Foster parents often returned children if they were suffering from any medical complaint. In Laois one five-year old was reported to be back in the home because he was suffering from a prolapse of the rectum - which was successfully treated.¹⁰³
- 10.77 However many of the children had severe physical or intellectual disabilities. When Margaret Reidy inspected the unmarried mothers and children in the Tipperary North county home in 1958, she found
- three bedfast children in the nursery, two invalids - a spina bifida and a hydrocephalic - and an apparently normal healthy baby. The infant was feeding itself from a bottle which was propped on the pillow and there was evidence that the two invalid children (who because of their disability were lying on their backs) had fed themselves also as partially empty feeding-bottles were on the floor beside their cots. The two invalids were lying on bare mackintoshes and it appeared to me that quite a time had elapsed from when they were given care last. The door was closed and the children were unsupervised. The other children were in a Dayroom which looked equally unkempt and neglected, a 'bad' low-grade (female) mental defective was eating bread which was being shared by the toddlers from the floor which was far from clean and which had been 'abused' by the toddlers. Altogether, it was a very distressing sight.

¹⁰² Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/447861.

¹⁰³ Department of Health, MHS/INA/0/490058.

- 10.78 The matron, who was out visiting the dentist, 'pointed out that the care of invalid children and low-grade defectives was very time-absorbing, that there were fewer unmarried mothers now in institutions than in the past to assist'.¹⁰⁴
- 10.79 In 1953 one woman wrote to the Minister for Health complaining that mothers whose children were boarded out were required to remain in the Wexford county home, as unpaid workers, sometimes until their child was 15 years old. If a mother insisted on leaving the county home her child(ren) were removed from foster homes and the mother was made responsible for their maintenance. When Miss Litster checked with the Wexford authorities she was informed that this rule still applied though
- Matron has assured me on several occasions that although she must leave mothers under the impression that it will be enforced, she will not in fact remove children from their foster homes if their mothers leave the County Home. It is thought to be in their interests to subject them to the discipline of the institution as long as possible.
- 10.80 Miss Litster reported that a few years previously several women, whose children were boarded out, had left the county home without permission, but no attempt was made to enforce their return 'and it is difficult to see how return could have been enforced'. Mothers, if permitted to leave to take up employment, were asked to contribute to the support of their children - but 'no hard and fast rule as to amount can be made'. A memorandum in the department noted that the local authorities justified this rule on the grounds that 'if the mothers are relieved of their responsibilities, and discharged, they will fall into similar trouble again, and that discharge in such circumstances only encourages immorality'. The officials determined that the matter 'calls for delicate handling...any official reply...might have the effect of fomenting trouble with other inmates in a similar position and create an embarrassing situation both for the local authority and the Department'. It was agreed that Miss Litster would meet the matron 'with a view to relaxation of the rather rigid attitude of the local authority'.¹⁰⁵
- 10.81 In Wicklow, mothers whose children were boarded out were 'expected to remain in the home until two years have elapsed from the date of confinement', working without pay. In 1943 Miss Litster reported that if a mother left the Meath county

¹⁰⁴ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/471871.

¹⁰⁵ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/476463.

home any children that had been boarded out were 'handed to her'; believed that Meath was the only county to follow 'this short-sighted policy'. . In 1950 the Department of Health, noted that one child who had been in a 'very satisfactory foster home' was returned to her mother in such circumstances; the mother subsequently returned to the county home to give birth to another child and the whereabouts of her older child was unknown. A local official claimed that Meath was planning to pay mothers working in the county home for their labour, using this money to meet the cost of boarding out.¹⁰⁶ The minutes of the South Cork board public assistance record several instances of mothers 'escaping' from the county home - generally during mass. Although the Gardaí were asked to apprehend them, and in at least one case were aware of the address in Cork city where a mother was staying, there is no evidence that they were returned to the county home.¹⁰⁷

Conclusions

- 10.82 County homes continued to accommodate single mothers and children until the 1960s, despite frequent statements by the DLGPH that they should be removed from the county home. This happened for a combination of reasons: for many years they were the only places that admitted single mothers on a second or subsequent pregnancy, and a woman could bring her older children to the county home during her confinement; the homes were the last-resort refuge for mothers and children. Local authorities acquiesced, indeed probably connived at the retention of single mothers, because they valued their unpaid work. The conditions in Ireland's county homes were primitive, lacking in privacy and dignity, and they were utterly unsuitable for children. Until the 1950s the mothers in most of the homes (perhaps all) were required to carry out physically-demanding, unpleasant chores in primitive conditions. The type of work that was required of unmarried mothers in county homes was far in excess of the work that was expected of women in mother and baby homes, and until the 1950s, and in some cases the 1960s, the living conditions for both mothers and children in the county homes remained largely unchanged from the pre-independence workhouse.
- 10.83 There was also an unstated segregation between mothers and children in county homes, and those who were maintained by local authorities in mother and baby homes. Women from more deprived backgrounds, those deemed to have physical

¹⁰⁶ Department of Health RM/ARC/O/ 489391; NATARCH/ARC/O/408587

¹⁰⁷ South Cork, Board of Health and Public Assistance, minutes, 13 Dec. 1937, 23 May 1938.

or intellectual needs, and children with special needs were much more likely to be found in county homes.

- 10.84 Generations of single mothers in county homes, institutions which were owned and run by local authorities, carried out onerous and often degrading unpaid labour, and some were effectively held hostage in these homes, threatened with having to take on responsibility for maintaining their child(ren) if they attempted to leave. This is yet another instance of a gulf between the regulations laid down by central government, and their implementation by the local authorities. County homes also provided emergency accommodation for women and children in need - a role that was later undertaken by women's refuges.