

Chapter 16: The County Clare Nursery, Kilrush 1922-1932

Introduction

- 16.1 As described in Chapter 1, in the period 1920-22 changes were made to the operation of the poor law and its institutions. As part of these changes, the County Clare Amalgamation Scheme was agreed by Clare county council in 1921.¹ This scheme provided for the closure of many of the workhouses in Clare and for changes in the use of others. It was agreed that part of the Kilrush workhouse would be used as a county nursery. The fever hospital and infirmary which were attached to the Kilrush workhouse became the Kilrush district hospital. The various boards of guardians in Clare were replaced by the Clare Board of Health. These changes (and others) were given statutory backing by the *County Scheme Order, Clare No 1, 1923*.² This order describes the Kilrush institution as an 'Auxiliary Home' for infant children and unmarried mothers. It was also known as the 'nursery' or the 'county nursery' or the 'orphanage'; locally, the 'nursery' seems to have been the usual name. It was envisaged that it would be a home not only for unmarried mothers and their children but also for children who were already in the workhouse system and thereafter children who were orphaned or abandoned. The Kilrush workhouse closed at the end of January 1922 and the nursery came into operation immediately thereafter. It occupied part of the old workhouse and the rest remained vacant.

Sources

Institutional records

- 16.2 The Commission has not found any extant institutional records for the Kilrush nursery. The minutes of the Clare Board of Health refer to a register of all children coming into the nursery but the register itself is not included in the archives of Clare county council. It seems likely that records of residents were kept in the same way as in county homes and other similar institutions but they do not seem to have survived.

¹ *The Clare Champion*, 23 July 1921

² http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1923/sro/940/made/en/print?q=Clare+County+scheme+Order&search_type=si

Local authority records

- 16.3 Minute books of Clare County Council, the Clare Board of Health, Kilrush Board of Guardians and Kilrush Rural District Council are held in the Clare County Council Archives. The minutes of the Board of Health and its sub-committee, the County Nursery and District Hospital Committee are the most important source for information on the Kilrush nursery and much of the information in this chapter comes from these minutes. The Board of Health met regularly and a meeting of the Nursery and District Hospitals sub-committee followed the Board meeting. The matron or officer in charge of each institution made a monthly report from around mid-1923 onwards. The reports of the matrons of the different institutions were read into the minutes although reports from the nursery did not start to appear until 1924. Orders and proposals by the councillors were also recorded as were orders and instructions from the Department of Local Government and Public Health. The nursery matron's reports contained information about the condition of the building and facilities, issues relating to the women and children, food supplies, and personnel. Over time, there were fewer references to the women and children. From 1929 until the closure of the nursery in 1932, the matron's reports were occasional and had very little content.
- 16.4 The minutes include reports from the Assistance Officers on the boarding out of children. These list the details of children boarded out and the names and addresses of foster parents. It is not clear if all the children listed were from the nursery. There are reports of inspections by Assistance Officers on the living conditions of the foster children and on the removal of children and their placement with other foster parents or their return to the nursery.
- 16.5 Other relevant information in the minute books includes details of tenders for the supply of milk, food and services to the nursery. There are detailed invoices for goods and services provided. There are invoices for coffins provided to the nursery and the district hospital.

Kilrush Baptismal Records

- 16.6 The Commission has had access to the baptismal records of Kilrush parish church from 1922-1932. These records contain the names of the children baptised, the mother's name (sometimes there is reference to a father), the priest who baptised the child and the parish the mother was from.

Local Newspapers

- 16.7 The *Clare Champion* and *Saturday Record* are available at the Clare Local Studies Centre on microfilm. Both papers reported on meetings of Clare county council and the meetings of the Board of Health. The reporting was extensive and often gave verbatim accounts of meetings. These reports have much more detail on what was said by public representatives than the minute books. The reporting on the setting up of the County Clare amalgamation scheme was detailed and often covered several pages of the newspaper. This gives an insight into the thinking behind the setting up of the institutions and in particular the financial concerns voiced by those representing rate payers. The reporting on the closure of the orphanage is also extensive and explores the reasons for and against put forward by the various interested parties. Both papers carried details of inspections of the nursery and on an enquiry carried out on behalf of the Board of Health on the boarding out scheme.

Department of Health

- 16.8 The Commission has had access to a small number of Department of Health files mainly from the period 1922-23.

Governance

- 16.9 Kilrush nursery was owned and financed by Clare county council and was run by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy between 1922 and 1928 and by directly employed lay staff from 1928 to 1932. It closed in March 1932.

County Clare Board of Health

- 16.10 The Board of Health was appointed by Clare county council. The first board which was appointed in November 1921 had 30 members: ten members of Clare county council; four people nominated by that council, one of whom was a priest and one a TD; 11 chairmen of rural and urban district councils; three members of the county insurance committee and two representatives of the county medical association. It established sub-committees to manage the various institutions in Co Clare; the County Nursery committee was established to manage the Kilrush nursery. Initially, the members of the sub-committee were from Clare county council, Kilrush rural district council and two women, one of whom was the chair.³ The amalgamation scheme had envisaged that the sub-committee for the nursery

³ *The Saturday Record*, 1 April 1922

would include a doctor and 'at least two ladies'. The legislation did not include this as a requirement. In June 1923, the sub-committee included two priests - one from Kilrush and one from Kilkee. The membership of the sub-committee changed over the years and by 1928, it was all male and seems to have been exclusively county councillors.

- 16.11 The intention was that the sub-committee would oversee routine expenditure but all other expenses had to be sanctioned by the County Board of Health.⁴

Sisters of Mercy

- 16.12 The Sisters of Mercy had been employed in the fever hospital and infirmary which were attached to the Kilrush workhouse since 1875. They were employees of the Kilrush board of guardians and, from 1922, of the Clare Board of Health. Kilrush had a similar status to Pelletstown (see Chapter 13). The Sisters of Mercy are recorded as being in charge of the nursery from February 1922.
- 16.13 The role of the Sisters of Mercy in the running of the nursery was that of day-to-day management of the women and the facilities. The status of the nuns was clarified in a letter from the Department of Local Government and Public Health (DLGPH) in May 1923 regarding the appointment of specific Sisters to the positions of storekeeper and matron. A second letter stated that only one person should be appointed.
- 16.14 There does appear to have been some controversy about the role of the religious orders in the early days of the amalgamation as is evident from a letter to the Board of Health from Bishop Fogarty of Killaloe which was read into the minutes in January 1922. The letter stated that the bishop had no objections to the Sisters of Mercy taking control of the Central Home (the county home in Ennis) but he could not allow them to carry out night duties as it was against bishops' regulations and would make it impossible for them to carry out their 'spiritual exercises'. The Board of Health had resolved that, if the Sisters could not undertake full duties in the county home, including night duty, the board would lose the services of the Sisters 'with the greatest regret'.⁵ The bishop was not impressed by what he regarded as a threat from the councillors to dismiss the Sisters:

⁴ *The Clare Champion*, 23 July 1921.

⁵ Department of Health file: RM/ARC/0/520970

There is a greater necessity for it now than at any time since the nuns took charge of the Workhouse Hospital. Therefore the statement of your committee that there is no alternative but dismissal is to me unintelligible. The desire of your committee to get rid of the nuns in the care of the poor is I fear a bad omen. It is not for gain or pleasure the nuns undertake the care of the poor and infirm but for Christian charity... When the advisors of your committee have turned [on/out] the nuns and staffed the place with young lay nurses, the poor helpless old people shall be carted there (from) all parts of the county and thrown in a heap to rot neglected and uncared for by Divine Love.

- 16.15 There is no record of a reply from the board to the bishop although there is reference to an appointment of a maternity nurse that was 'deleted' pending a meeting with the bishop. It is not clear if the prohibition on night duties also applied in the nursery.

The Department of Local Government and Public Health

- 16.16 As with all the mother and baby homes which were publicly financed, the Department of Local Government (DLG) and later the Department of Local Government and Public Health (DLGPH) was involved in decisions about policy and spending. In January 1922, the Board of Health asked the DLG to appoint an inspector to assist in the classifying of patients for the purposes of implementing the amalgamation scheme.⁶ It appears that the department had a much more active and direct involvement with Kilrush than it did with institutions such as Pelletstown (see Chapter 13) and Tuam (see Chapter 15); however, it may be that this impression is due to the absence of records in relation to Tuam in the 1920s.

Physical conditions

- 16.17 The outline of the scheme for the county nursery which was approved by the Board of Health in January 1922 stated that the accommodation consisted of a maternity ward with six or seven beds, a day nursery and a night nursery. There was 'no lack of accommodation' and no new buildings were needed 'but a certain amount of painting and decorating and internal structural alterations will have to be carried out. Both the present kitchen and present laundry are quite inadequate'.⁷ The

⁶ Department of Health file: RM/ARC/0/520970

⁷ *ibid*

scheme included proposals for temporary and permanent changes to the accommodation. This included installation of a bathroom and lavatory, a labour ward and a small isolation unit. The nursery and the district hospital had made a joint report about the water supply, sewerage and sanitary conditions.

- 16.18 By March 1922, the Board of Health was considering an engineer's report⁸ on the requirements for the nursery so the nursery committee sent a quite detailed report to the board. It asked the board to 'keep in mind the extreme state of dilapidation of the main building known as the Workhouse, the walls are rough, windows small without proper frames or fittings, no grates, the passages flagged, the wood work rough and defective - all tending in the opinion of the Committee to have a depressing effect on the inmates'. The committee went on to describe what they had done. Initially, they had accommodated the school children in the girls' school room but this did not work. It was decided to move to the sheds. There were two dormitories there and a 'dining room on the flat, with outside dry closets, an outside bathroom attached to the old Infirmary and a pump all within a few yards of the sheds'. These new arrangements were 'very superior' when compared to the previous arrangements. The main kitchen was closed and all cooking was being done in the infirmary kitchen. The committee said that the Sisters of Mercy were very satisfied with the marked improvement in the children which they attributed to the 'complete change of environment and attendance at the local schools'.
- 16.19 The committee said that they could not find a way to improve the day nursery except to remove as many children as possible from it to the school going section. 'The room is small for the numbers and has an easterly aspect and never gets any sunshine.' However, the babies with one or two exceptions looked 'healthy well-fed and clean'. 'We have visited them frequently and always found them well attended to'.
- 16.20 The committee asked for painted walls, tiled floors, baths and lavatories. The engineer had been asked to make out separate estimates for the main house, the maternity block and the laundry. The engineer had not told them how he proposed to provide hot and cold water and they were anxious about this. It is not clear exactly what happened to the various proposals but it is the case that no significant improvements were made.

⁸ The Commission has not seen this report.

- 16.21 The physical condition of the Kilrush nursery was always very poor indeed. It was so bad that its closure was considered less than a year after it opened. In December 1922, the Local Government Inspector, James McLysaght, who inspected all the county institutions at the request of a committee of inquiry set up by Clare county council, said that it was a 'perfect scandal to have anyone in the place'. He pointed out that there was no sanitary accommodation and no water supply⁹ and that it would cost a lot of money to make it habitable; he was concerned that the prevailing conditions, 'would give rise some time or other to an outbreak of fever for which the County Board of Health would be responsible'.¹⁰
- 16.22 One councillor stated that 'it was an absolute disgrace' in the twentieth century. He suggested to the committee that it consider the establishment of a provincial nursery rather than having one in every county. This suggestion was unanimously adopted by the committee.
- 16.23 However, the proposal did not go any further and despite ongoing complaints about the conditions in the nursery, it continued to function with little if any repairs or improvements. In April 1923, the county engineer reported to the Board of Health that there were wells in the yard which could be used for a clean water supply. He was instructed to draw up plans and estimates for providing the water supply to the nursery and local hospital. According to a history compiled by the Sisters of Mercy, reconstruction work was carried out at the former infirmary and fever hospital in 1924 and it then became known as St Joseph's District Hospital.¹¹ Nothing seems to have been done about improving the nursery.
- 16.24 The poor conditions in the nursery were a matter of ongoing correspondence between the matron, the Board of Health and the DLGPH. In April 1924, the matron complained that the institution was overcrowded as there were 164 residents in the nursery and children were sleeping two in a bed with 'every habitable corner occupied.'
- 16.25 In 1927, the *Report of the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor* described the conditions in the Kilrush nursery as follows:

⁹ The town of Kilrush had no public water supply at this time and the town of Ennis had a very poor supply.

¹⁰ *The Saturday Record*, 9 December 1922.

¹¹ Pius O'Brien, *Sisters of Mercy of Kilrush and Kilkee*, Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, 1997.

Kilrush' Auxiliary Home is in the old Kilrush Workhouse and was established for unmarried mothers and infant children.

The Home is in a very poor condition of repair. There is no water supply and no bathing or sanitary accommodation, and the lighting is by lamps. The Sisters of Mercy, who are in charge of the Home, are themselves very insufficiently accommodated. They have no proper kitchen or refectory or bathing and sanitary arrangements. It is not fair to expect the Sisters to remain under the conditions as they exist.

...

The laundry work of the institution and also that of the District Hospital, which is on the opposite side of the public road, is done in a primitive and badly equipped laundry.

The failure of the Board of Health to adapt the workhouse properly for the purpose to which it has been allocated reflects gravely on their administration.

...

In the maternity department connected with the Home there is no labour ward. The provision of such is very necessary.

- 16.26 In August 1927, there was still no electric light despite pleadings by the matron, and the roof was in a dilapidated condition. The Board of Health approved of 'inviting quotations'. A report in the *Saturday Record* in February 1930 stated that there were 61 patients; all the buildings were in a very bad state of repair with leaking roofs; 'the laundry is of the worst type, no baths and no inside sanitary accommodation'. In 1930 the long-awaited water supply was still not in place and the county engineer stated that the cost of laying on water from the Kilrush water supply would be £30. The matter was referred to the 'Visiting Committee'.
- 16.27 On 25 March 1931, the Minister for Local Government and Public Health was asked 'whether he will state the amount of money spent on (a) hospital improvements, including new works, in County Clare; (b) improvements to the County Home in Ennis and Nursery in Kilrush, since the amalgamation of workhouses in 1920'.
- 16.28 The Minister (General Mulcahy) replied with information on the amounts spent or planned to be spent on a number of hospitals including Kilrush Hospital. He said that large improvement works were contemplated for the county home but they had not yet been undertaken. There was no specific mention of the nursery but the

minister said that there may have been minor works carried out at the county home and the nursery but particulars concerning these were not available to the department.¹² As department approval would have been required for any significant spending on the nursery, this means that no serious attempt was made to improve conditions during the ten years of the existence of the nursery.

Staffing

- 16.29 The DLGPH took a detailed interest in the staffing levels and staff conditions in Kilrush. One particular example of its involvement arose in 1925. A woman who was employed as an attendant became ill and was hospitalised whilst working in the nursery in 1925. The department told the Board of Health that it should not pay her food rations and 'would do well to fix a charge for her maintenance'. The board responded that the woman was married and in poor circumstances and no charge was fixed. This did not satisfy the department who said that the matter was being referred to the auditor. In response the board set a charge of one shilling a day.
- 16.30 The outline of the scheme for the county nursery envisaged that there would be the following staff: matron (a nun), a lay assistant housekeeper, a nun in charge of the kitchen and stores, two nuns looking after the schoolchildren, a nun looking after the babies with a lay trained children's nurse and two male porters to attend at the gate, bring supplies of fuel and work the garden. There would also be a visiting medical officer, two midwives and a chaplain.
- 16.31 In July 1925, the department instructed that the staff of the nursery should consist of a medical officer, two nuns, two maternity nurses, a female attendant, a cook, a laundress and one general male attendant. The department further instructed that one of the nuns be 'dispensed with' and the salary of the male attendant be reduced to £2 a week. It raised a question about the attendant for school children and requested that the matron submit a report of this person's duties. In August 1925, it was recorded that the assistant matron (a Sister of Mercy) was in charge of the school children. Details of the annual salaries of staff employed in the nursery were entered in the minutes for September 1925.
- 16.32 The chaplain was paid £45 and the general attendant porter £104; neither lived on the premises. The matron, assistant matron, nurse (all Sisters of Mercy) and the

¹² Dail Debates, 25 March 1931

midwife were each paid £60; they all lived on the premises. Others who lived on the premises were two attendants (paid £36 and £36 8s respectively), a cook who was paid £45 6s 8d and a laundress who was paid £36 8s.

- 16.33 Dr Counihan who was the medical officer for Kilrush was responsible for the county nursery and Kilrush district hospital. Although not listed in the September 1925 minutes, he is referred to in minutes throughout the institution's existence.
- 16.34 In July 1926, the DLGPH questioned the appointment of Sister M B Sheedy, a Sister of Mercy, as the matron because of her lack of qualifications as a nurse. This started a correspondence between the Board of Health and the department about the appointment that resulted in another Sister taking up the position as matron as a short-term appointment. The department refused to approve the employment of a third Sister at the nursery and instructed she should be discharged.
- 16.35 A letter from the Mother Superior responded to the Board of Health in February 1927 asking why the appointment was temporary considering that the Sister in question had seven years' experience. She also stated that when the Sisters took charge of the nursery, it was made clear by the department that the matron need not be a trained nurse but experienced in institutional management and, unless the decision was reconsidered, she would withdraw the Sisters from the nursery. She also referred to the fact that Sisters were being trained and that, although there were four Sisters in the nursery, only three were receiving a salary. The department responded stating that the temporary employment contract was a local authority requirement. The members of the Board of Health recommended that the present matron be appointed 'as they were of the opinion that a Sister can best fill the post'.
- 16.36 There is no record of a response. The department raised the issue of the appointment of Sister M Baptist Sheedy again in November 1927. This time they requested to know when she would take up the position as matron. In April 1928, the board minutes included a note on the resignation of a Sister due to ill health together with a proposal for her replacement. In August the department wrote stating that, as the replacement was not a trained nurse, this was not acceptable. This was followed by a proposal to replace her with a record keeper. This triggered a response from the Mother Superior stating that the other Sisters were

resigning from their posts at the county nursery. The board accepted these resignations with regret and a plan was put in place to advertise the positions.

- 16.37 There is a note in the Mercy Archives in 1928 which records that the Reverend Mother had ‘found it necessary’ to withdraw the Sisters from Kilrush due to the reluctance of the ‘Local Government Board’¹³ to sanction the appointment of nuns others than trained nurses. ‘The County Nursery is now in the hands of secular nurses.’
- 16.38 In December 1928 a lay nurse was appointed as matron of the county nursery and another lay person was appointed as temporary midwife. In September 1930, the new matron asked that her role as matron be made permanent and, in response, the department stated that in view of the ‘contemplated change in connection with the institution, they do not consider it desirable to make a permanent appointment at present’.

Women and children

- 16.39 Because there are no extant admissions registers, it is not possible to establish exactly how many women and children were in Kilrush nursery. From the limited information available, it seems likely that there were between 300 and 400 mothers there and considerably more children.
- 16.40 The outline of the scheme for the county nursery which was approved by the Board of Health in January 1922 noted that the nursery committee had no statistics available to them nor had they seen the original amalgamation scheme. Consequently, they did not know exactly what had been envisaged by the originators of the scheme. They proceeded on the basis that the object was ‘to take the existing conditions as they stand in each Union and to provide in one Institution for what has hitherto been provided for in the several institutions but of course in a more up-to-date and modern way’. The committee assumed that 40 mothers would be admitted each year; there would be about 160 children up to school age and about 80 school going children aged between five and seven.¹⁴
- 16.41 The March 1922 report of the nursery committee commented on the mothers:

¹³ The Local Government Board was the predecessor of the DLGPH; it ceased to exist in 1922; see Chapter 1.

¹⁴ Department of Health file: RM/ARC/0/520970

The mothers are neglected, they have no proper clothing and no comfort of any kind. They are willing to do any work even the most menial and unpleasant. A certain number worked in the laundry under the old management. The washing was done with scrubbing brushes. We are supplying washboards. A strong mangle is required. We don't consider it is humane to allow expectant and nursing mothers to wring out heavy twill sheets and blankets as they do at present. We feel strongly that the lot of these poor women should be improved. Some are under 20 years and we feel confident we could get good results both to the women and the Home if we could, with discretion and common sense, give them comfort in their work, food and clothing.

- 16.42 It would appear that there were a number of unaccompanied children. In March 1922, there were 22 school going children in the nursery.¹⁵ The minutes of the nursery committee meeting of 23 March 1922 noted that Clare Board of Health had agreed that children could be retained in the nursery when the mothers were discharged and the committee could use its discretion about admitting children without mothers. There are also references to mothers being discharged for 'insubordination' and the children being retained.

Births in the nursery

- 16.43 The nursery was in the parish of Kilrush and the chaplain was the local priest. The children born in the nursery were baptised in the parish, most likely in the nursery chapel. Their births and information on their mothers were recorded in the Kilrush parish register. The register also shows that a small number of the parents were married, as both names are in the register. These were mainly from the town of Kilrush or the surrounding area and may have been people in poor circumstances who needed medical attention. It could also be that Kilrush district hospital, which had a maternity unit, could not facilitate them.
- 16.44 The first birth recorded for the Co Clare nursery was a baby boy, born on the 9 February 1922; he was baptised the following day. His mother's parish was named. The last baby born in the nursery was also a boy, born on 21 February 1932. His mother's parish was also stated. The nursery closed in March 1932. In

¹⁵ Department of Health file: RM/ARC/0/520968

the ten-year period, the baptismal records suggest that 330 children were born in the nursery:

1922	26
1923	36
1924	19
1925	33
1926	51
1927	33
1928	30
1929	27
1930	36
1931	35
1932	4

16.45 Each baptismal record contained the baby's name, the mother's name, the mother's parish, the priest, the godmother and some additional information. This usually contained the words 'extra marital, born in home'. The godmothers were other mothers in the nursery and some of these women were godmother to several children. The register also records if and when the child as an adult got married. There are references to people marrying in Britain and the United States as well as Ireland; they would have contacted Kilrush Parish Office for baptismal certificates. There are also a couple of instances where the father acknowledged the child at a later date and this is also recorded. Where a child was found abandoned, the words 'Infantus Expositus' were entered.

Other children

16.46 Other children lived in the nursery but the number cannot be established. As already stated, the nursery housed not only unmarried mothers and their children but also orphaned or abandoned children. In May 1922, the nursery committee noted that there were three boys in the institution, two aged 10 and one aged 14. In June 1925, the matron's report to the Board of Health referred to a woman who had been taken in with her children the previous year. The children had been fostered but the mother was refusing to take up offers of employment. Another report related to two children who were admitted to the nursery due to 'desertion by the mother'. They were aged eighteen months and three years. Their father, who had an army pension of 27s, refused to contribute to their support. This meant that

there were infants, young children, older children and adults all kept in the same environment.

- 16.47 In 1927, the *Report of the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor* reported that there were 51 women and 105 children in the nursery; 57 of the children were over two years of age and 37 of these were attending school outside the nursery.
- 16.48 The DLGPH Report for the year 1928/29 recorded that there were 26 mothers of first-born children and six mothers of two or more children in Kilrush at the end of 1928.

Length of stay

- 16.49 The length of stay was one of the first issues addressed by the nursery committee. At its meeting in April 1922, some members considered that there should not be a defined length of stay as they felt that this would stop some women coming into the nursery.¹⁶ However, in May 1922, it was agreed that mothers would not be allowed leave the institution until the child was at least two years old.¹⁷ This was difficult to enforce as in March 1923, the Board of Health informed the nursery committee that it had no power to detain mothers who were willing to bring their children with them.
- 16.50 The minutes of the nursery committee meeting of 23 March 1922 noted that Clare Board of Health had agreed that children could be retained in the nursery when the mothers were discharged and the committee could use its discretion about admitting children without mothers.
- 16.51 The matron raised the matter in a report to the Board of Health in April 1924. She proposed that the children of the mothers who 'were allowed out' be kept in the nursery as they were 'in the most cases placed in the care of indifferent foster parents, badly treated, their education neglected, and brought up in the most objectionable surroundings'. She also recommended that when children reached the age of seven they should be sent to an industrial school. The Board of Health was in agreement and put forward a motion asking that the Minister for Local

¹⁶ *The Saturday Record*, 1 April 1922

¹⁷ Department of Health file: RM/ARC/0/520964

Government and Public Health change the law in relation to admission to industrial schools (see Chapter 1).

- 16.52 Her suggestion to keep the children until they were seven was not accepted and in July 1924 Miss Fitzgerald-Kenney, a local government inspector, appeared before the Board of Health and made clear that children from aged two to twelve were to be boarded out.
- 16.53 In April 1924, on foot of an inspection by county councillors, the board ordered that 'unmarried mothers and children be kept for a period of two years from the date of their admission order'. There was no legal basis for this although it does seem to have been the approved policy of the DLGPH. It is not clear that this was implemented fully in Kilrush. There are instances where women were 'detained' when they should not have been. For example, a woman came to collect her daughter and the daughter's baby but this was not allowed as the baby was only seven weeks old and allowing her out would cause 'much dissatisfaction amongst the other inmates'.
- 16.54 On another occasion, the matron referred in her report to a woman whom she was 'obliged to discharge' because of her behaviour. The woman went to live with her father but the matron kept the baby in the nursery as the weather was very cold. The board ordered that the mother take her child within fourteen days. In 1927 a mother left the nursery with her baby but the child was subsequently returned. The DLGPH queried why this had happened and was told by the Board of Health that 'this child has been deserted by her mother and the Civic Guards are endeavouring to trace the whereabouts of the latter'. In September 1925, the matron protested against an order made by the board to allow a mother to leave without her child who was only eight weeks old. Dr Counihan, the medical officer, supported the matron and the board ordered that both the mother and her baby be discharged at once or that both remain. Another mother was refused permission to leave as her baby was only one year and nine months old.
- 16.55 There were other occasions when the matron brought cases to the board about a mother and child leaving. In March 1925 a woman called for her unmarried daughter and 'strongly insisted on taking away the child of the latter'. The matron refused, pending the instructions of the board. The board ordered that the mother be discharged and the child boarded out. On another occasion a mother who had

spent two years in the nursery was 'most anxious to leave with her four illegitimate children'. The matron stated she did not think this woman was capable of taking care of herself and her children. The nursery chaplain was of the same view and the order from the board was that the woman be 'retained' in the nursery. There was no legal basis for the retention of this woman and her children, but she almost certainly was not aware of that.

- 16.56 In general, it would appear that many of the women stayed for two years unless taken out by their family and then only with the permission of the board. There were a number of 'escape' attempts. In May 1924, the matron reported that three women had 'scaled the wall' but had been arrested and brought back by the Gardaí. In October of that year, she reported that two women escaped over the wall leaving behind their two children, one aged three weeks and the other five months. The matter was reported to the Gardaí.
- 16.57 In 1927, the *Report of the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor* said that the women were 'retained' in the nursery 'for two years if possible and an endeavour [is] made to find suitable employment for them on discharge and to keep in touch with them'. The number of 'first offenders' was 37. The report went on to state that the premises was of 'sufficient size to permit of separating the less culpable from the degraded, and if the best is to be got from this Home some classification should be made'.

Working

- 16.58 The outline of the scheme for a county nursery envisaged that a 'certain amount of labour will be available by mothers' before they leave the institution and their services could be used in the laundry where all the laundry work for the district hospital could be done. In practice, it appears that women were expected to work while in the nursery and this included working in the district hospital. If a woman refused, as was the case with one 'insubordinate inmate', the nursery committee decided that she should be sent to the county home and the child kept in the nursery.¹⁸ There are references to women being sent to the county home and this was viewed as a punishment. If sent to the county home they would have been expected to work there as well and the work there was likely to be more onerous.

¹⁸ *The Saturday Record*, 1 April 1922.

Discipline

- 16.59 Issues of discipline within the nursery were discussed at a number of board meetings. During a Board of Health inspection in 1924, councillors inspecting the premises referred to interviewing two women ‘who from the way they spoke in our presence, the matron must have great difficulty with them.’ They also referred to a woman who had struck another woman with an iron and another who refused to work and brought her child into her bed ‘causing damage to the bed linen’. In the first case the board ordered that the woman be prosecuted although she was later discharged and her baby kept in the nursery. In the second case the woman was sent to the county home but was refused admittance and returned to the nursery that evening. In December 1926, Dr Counihan referred to ‘one of the inmates being guilty of gross insubordination’.
- 16.60 In later years, there were fewer references to bad behaviour and ‘insubordination’ but this may be due to changes in the reporting process rather than any changes within the nursery.

Clothing

- 16.61 It would appear that some form of uniform clothing was provided to the women and children in the nursery. In March 1922, the nursery committee of management noted that the following requisition was submitted by the Sisters of Mercy and approved: 100 yards of flannelette for underwear; 20 yards of navy flannel, 100 yards of grey calico, 8 lbs of black 4 ply thread, 12 sets of knitting needles, a dozen packages of assorted sewing needles, 30 pairs of children’s boots and 30 pairs of women’s boots.¹⁹

Deaths

- 16.62 The available records do not establish the number of deaths in the nursery; they do refer to the deaths of children and to the conditions which contributed to the deaths.
- 16.63 The Central Statistics Office figures show details of deaths of illegitimate infants in institutions from 1923, broken down by county. The death rate in Co Clare institutions is very high when compared with the numbers in the baptismal record. As the nursery was the only institution for ‘illegitimate’ children in Co Clare, it is

¹⁹ Department of Health file: RM/ARC/0/520964

probable that at least the majority died there. The recorded number of deaths of 'illegitimate' infants in institutions in Clare is as follows:²⁰

1923	15
1924	19
1925	15
1926	27
1927	20
1928	14
1929	11
1930	13
1931	20
1932	14

- 16.64 The year 1932 is anomalous as the nursery closed in March of that year and unmarried mothers were to be sent to Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea. It is possible that this did not always happen and mothers had their children in the county home in Ennis or in the local hospital. In 1933 the records show that twelve 'illegitimate' infants died in the institutions in Clare.
- 16.65 As already stated, there are references in the minutes to the serious concerns of Dr Counihan, the matron and others about conditions in the nursery and the risk they posed to the residents.
- 16.66 In 1924, Dr Counihan sent a report asking the board to approve a revised 'dietary scale' as 'the mothers were unable to nurse their children satisfactorily'. He also wanted the diet of the school children revised. This was approved subject to sanction by the DLGPH. In June 1927, the department wrote to the board questioning the dietary scale in the nursery: 'the allowances of bread, potatoes and butter in the amended scale are substantially in excess of those indicated in the Department's scale and the Ministry see no adequate reason for such increased allowances'. This was despite the fact that in March 1927, Dr Counihan had reported the death rate as 'appalling'.
- 16.67 At a meeting of the Clare Board of Health a councillor referred to the death rate:

²⁰ <http://www.cso.ie/en/search/index.html?q=Infant%20mortality%20illegitimate>

At one time, the death rate in the Nursery was so high that special precautions had to be taken to protect them. Two nurses had been hired to watch them night and day and the mothers and children had been retained for two years as a further precaution.²¹

- 16.68 In the same month, February 1927, the matron reported that she had to requisition a special night nurse as there were twenty-seven children suffering from measles.
- 16.69 Another indicator of the high mortality rate was the continuous requisitions for coffins which are recorded in the minutes. This record also points to children of different ages dying in the nursery as the coffins were of different sizes. (The figures quoted above refer only to infant deaths.)
- 16.70 There are few references to specific deaths of infants or older children in the minutes; two exceptions being the cases of Mary Sherlock who was found dead in her mother's bed in March 1926 and the child (unnamed) of Mary Enright. In the Enright case, in July 1930, the DLGPH requested that an enquiry be set up 'to ascertain the circumstances and report on the matter'. There are no further references to this case.
- 16.71 Mary Sherlock's inquest was held in April 1926 and a full report was carried in *The Saturday Record*. A witness gave evidence that she was an 'inmate' of the nursery and that she saw Annie Sherlock take the baby into her bed at about 5.30 in the morning. She said that later than morning when Annie got up, her baby did not move and she called out that Mary was dead. Another witness, a nurse, said that as the place was not properly heated in winter, the mothers took the babies into the bed with them. Dr Counihan examined the baby and said that he found 'no bruises or marks of violence' and that the body was well nourished. He concluded that she died from smothering or asphyxia but he could not say how it happened. The jury found that the child died from asphyxia and they 'attached no blame to anybody'. The investigating Garda Superintendent felt otherwise and stated that the 'verdict may be all right but it would not do the state. I will have Annie Sherlock arrested and formally charged before the district justice'. A second report in the same newspaper stated:

²¹ *The Clare Champion*, 5 February 1927.

At a special court held at Kilrush Barracks, Annie Sherlock was charged with the murder of her illegitimate child aged 7 weeks at the Co Nursery, Kilrush where she had been an inmate and remanded in custody to the District Court at Kilrush.²²

- 16.72 There are no further references to this case in the newspapers, but there is a reference in the minutes to an Anne Sherlock being employed in the county home in March 1927. It seems likely that this was the same woman.

Closing the nursery

- 16.73 The closing of the nursery was on the agenda from a very early stage. The Board of Health put proposals to the DLGPH. In March 1928, the Board of Health was considering the estimates for the new financial year. It made a series of recommendations to the county council, with a view to ensuring economies in administration. They included the abolition of the county nursery at Kilrush, the boarding out of some 90 children who were resident there and the transfer of the unmarried mothers to the county home.²³
- 16.74 In January 1929, the department said that the board's proposal to close the nursery and transfer the 'inmates' to the county home 'appears to commend itself'. It went on to say that it was not possible at that time to say if sufficient accommodation was available.
- 16.75 In 1930 the Board of Health began to look further afield for solutions. In July that year, a letter from the Sister in charge in Bessborough stated that only 'first offenders' were admitted and that the terms were 3s a day. This was noted in the record and it was decided that Bessborough be requested to reduce the cost to 2s a day as they were planning to send a number of cases. In response the department ordered that the board should consider sending suitable cases to Bessborough. Dr Counihan argued that in his opinion, there were fifteen 'first offenders of whom only one had good Home prospects... In regard to second or more offenders, the prospect of a Home was practically nil'. The board decided to send five first offenders to Bessborough. It is not known if this happened. The

²² *The Saturday Record*, 10 April 1926.

²³ *Nenagh Guardian*, 17 March 1928

Bessborough institutional records do not mention Kilrush nursery as a referring body in 1930-32.

- 16.76 In August 1930 a letter from the Good Shepherd Convent in Limerick²⁴ was received stating that it was prepared to take unmarried mothers who were 'first offenders'. In December 1931, the department made a suggestion that all expectant mothers might be sent to the 'Home at Shan Ross Abbey, Roscrea where there is more available accommodation than at Tuam'. The secretary of the board reported that the cost of keeping mothers at Sean Ross was 12s weekly and 17s 6d for mother and baby. He reported that 'mothers were retained as long as possible and situations found for them on discharge'. The board ordered that suitable unmarried mothers be sent to Sean Ross 'as soon as possible'.
- 16.77 Again, it is not clear if this happened; the Sean Ross institutional records do not record any referrals from Kilrush nursery. There is some evidence that it did happen. In December 1931, the Board of Health considered an application from three maternity nurses for expenses when conveying patients by ambulance to Sean Ross. The secretary said that when patients were being sent from the nursery at Kilrush to Sean Ross, it was necessary to send one of the nurses with them and they applied for £1 1s expenses. One member said that the nurses were paid and this was part of their job. The secretary pointed out that they had to get meals on the journey. 'They leave Kilrush about 9am in the morning, and they are not back at Kilrush until about 10pm at night.' After discussion about the cost of meals, the board decided to pay 7s 6d travelling expenses.²⁵
- 16.78 In the meantime, the newspapers carried extensive reports on board meetings about closure and these reports give verbatim accounts of the county councillors' comments on the matter. In November 1931, they discussed the benefits of sending the women to Sean Ross and noted that the average cost of keeping a mother and child in Kilrush was 24s as opposed to 21s at Sean Ross, a saving of 3s. This would have to be offset by the cost of having to employ helpers in Kilrush to take the place of the women (presumably in the district hospital).

²⁴ The Good Shepherd Sisters had an industrial school and a Magdalen laundry in Limerick; clearly the offer related to the laundry.

²⁵ *Nenagh Guardian*, 26 December 1931

- 16.79 In December 1931, the secretary put forward a plan to move the nursery to another part of the building which would have cost a total of £141. It was also suggested that four women from the nursery be employed in the hospital at £13 per annum. There were varying views among the councillors. One thought it would be throwing good money after bad; others suggested simply using the county home. The question of boarding out the children was discussed. It was argued that foster parents could be found for children aged between two and seven and paid 7s a week but it was considered that no one would take children under two. One councillor said: 'But if we close Kilrush Nursery, we cannot take the children down to the pier and drown them. You must board them out and even if we have to pay £1 a week it will be cheaper than a new institution.'
- 16.80 As Sean Ross would take only 'first offenders' the board discussed what to do with the women who were 'repeat offenders'. One councillor said that there were 'eight or ten such cases there at present and is it not an awful state of affairs to have to maintain an expensive institution for the sake of ten vagabonds'. The secretary stated that there were probably 15 'inmates' in the nursery at that time and the discussion continued with the Good Shepherd Convent Limerick suggested as a place for the second offenders. The problem there was that they would not take the children. It was pointed out that 'There is a County Home in Limerick and perhaps they may take the class we want to dispose of'.²⁶
- 16.81 The order for closure was made by the Minister for Local Government and Public Health and the letter of approval was read at a Clare county council meeting. A councillor from Kilrush objected to the closure on the grounds of the loss of business to the town stating: 'Everything is being brought away from Kilrush and we are now about to send our money to an institution in Roscrea'. Some councillors agreed that there would be a loss to Kilrush but the chairman said that the decision had been made:
- In the interests of these poor creatures themselves and in order to give them a decent chance at mending their ways...they would have a chance of learning some useful occupation which may be the means of preventing a lapse into wicked ways.²⁷

²⁶ *The Clare Champion*, 19 December 1931.

²⁷ *The Clare Champion*, 5 March 1932.

- 16.82 A letter from Sister De Sales at Sean Ross stated that she was prepared to receive 25 children on a day the following week at a rate of 10s each a week. The Board of Health agreed to pay the amount. The secretary mentioned that two children had been boarded out and then sent back as they were only a year old. He proposed that in the interests of the children, it would be better if they were sent to Sean Ross. He also proposed that the ten or twelve 'second offenders' in Kilrush be discharged and their children sent to Sean Ross. One councillor pointed out that this had happened before and they had come back; he asked if they could be sent to a Magdalen home. The secretary said that he had interviewed them and they would go anywhere except to an institution. One councillor remarked that 'it is all very fine to talk about letting these inmates go, but they are a dangerous type to have roaming the country'. The secretary replied that there was
- no legal power in the Board to detain any inmate for even an hour if she wishes to take her discharge. The only obligation on the inmate is that she must take her child with her, and that prevents a number of them from going out. That is why I suggest sending the children to the Roscrea institution and letting the mothers off. Every one of these children born in the county costs the rate-payer about £200 each until they reach 15 years of age.²⁸
- 16.83 The board agreed to act on the secretary's suggestion.²⁹ However, at a meeting in April 1932 he stated that there were ten maternity cases in the county home. It is not clear if these were transferred from the nursery or were unmarried mothers.³⁰

²⁸ *Nenagh Guardian*, 5 March 1932.

²⁹ *The Saturday Record*, 5 March 1932.

³⁰ *The Saturday Record*, 9 April 1932.