

Chapter 19: Sean Ross

Introduction

- 19.1 Sean Ross mother and baby home opened in 1931 and closed in 1969. During that time, 6,414 women were admitted there and 6,079 children were born or admitted there. It was owned and run by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The public assistance/health authorities paid for the vast majority of the mothers and their children while they were living in Sean Ross but there were a small number of 'private' patients.

Sources

- 19.2 The following is a summary of the main sources used for this chapter. A complete list is included in Part 5: Archives.

Institutional records

- 19.3 Sean Ross institutional records are held by the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA). As already reported, the Commission made digital copies of these records. There are over 14,000 records.
- 19.4 The institutional records include:
- Indoor Registers (admissions by county)
 - Admission Books
 - Private Patients Book
 - Nursery Admission Book
 - Maternity Register
 - Records and Particulars Books
 - Birth Registers
 - Death Register
 - Adoption Ledgers/Adoption Orders/Adoption Placements/American Adoption Files

Department of Health

- 19.5 The main Department of Health files used for this chapter are:
- INACT/INA/0/445784
HLTH/H27/2/3,

HPO/INA/0/425641
 INACT/INA/0/425115
 INACT/INA/0/426512
 INACT/INA/0/455744
 INACT/INA/0/464099
 INACT/INA/0/465642
 INACT/INA/0/471890
 NATARCH/ARC/0/404277
 NATARCH/ARC/0/413869

Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Congregational Archive, Chigwell, UK.

19.6 See Chapter 17.

Killaloe Diocesan Archives

19.7 The Fogarty Papers
 Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Box 31: 1.8; A2.

Local Authority Records for North and South Tipperary

19.8 The Commission examined archived local authority records of North and South Tipperary in the Civic Offices, Nenagh, Thurles Library and Tipperary County Archives, Clonmel. Three collections which were of interest to the Commission were identified: Minutes of the South Tipperary Board of Public Assistance, Minutes of the North Tipperary Board of Public Assistance and North Tipperary Managers Orders. These, however, did not have much information of relevance.

Other sources

19.9 Official publications, books and newspapers are referenced in the text.

Origins

19.10 In 1921, like all local authorities, councillors in North and South Tipperary and neighbouring counties were discussing changes to the poor law arrangements. While many Tipperary councillors acknowledged that the workhouse was an unsuitable environment for healthy women and children, initial proposals by members of the Tipperary boards did not consider that unmarried mothers and 'illegitimate' children should be housed separately from the 'aged, infirm and

lunatic' in these institutions.¹ However, in 1924, and in line with many other county councils, the North Tipperary Board of Health and Public Assistance discussed the possibility of setting up a children's home. This would accommodate healthy children from North and South Tipperary as well as children from neighbouring counties. Waterford county council said that they had made their own arrangements in this regard (with Bessborough) and Galway county council said that they were about to set up a children's home in Tuam. The North Tipperary board then proposed to transfer children from county homes and other institutions in Tipperary to St. Francis' Industrial School for Girls, Cashel, which was run by the Presentation Sisters. However, the superioress of that institution stated that she had no authority to admit children unless they were 'formally committed by a court'.²

- 19.11 The North Tipperary board regarded boarding out as the preferred alternative to rearing children in institutional settings and proposed an increase in the boarding out allowance to 25s a month in a bid to attract more foster parents. However, the Department of Local Government and Public Health (DLGPH) refused to sanction the increased rate and insisted that it remained capped at £1 (20 shillings) a month.³ In 1925, the chaplain to Thurles county home complained to the Tipperary board that the county home was 'full of children running wild and getting no education whatever'. In a bid to alleviate the overcrowded conditions the board appointed a ladies committee to use their influence to secure foster mothers for institutional children and advertised for suitable foster homes in local newspapers.⁴
- 19.12 By 1930, the North Tipperary board had made little progress in relation to the provision of services for unmarried mothers and their children. Institutional accommodation continued to be in county homes and the number of children in the boarding out system (31) was reportedly 'practically the same as previous years'. One councillor complained about the cost of accommodating single women and their children in county homes and claimed that 'poor people who had given service to the nation', on being admitted there, were forced to mix with 'part-lunatics' and 'a lot of unmarried mothers'.⁵

¹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 29 October 1921.

² *Nenagh Guardian*, 28 June 1924.

³ *Nenagh Guardian*, 5 July 1924.

⁴ *Nenagh Guardian*, 28 March 1925.

⁵ *Nenagh Guardian*, 21 June 1930.

- 19.13 In 1930, the DLGPH asked the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary if they would consider opening a second mother and baby home in Ireland (they were already running Bessborough – see Chapter 18). The Mother General of the congregation, accompanied by Mrs Crofts, a DLGPH inspector, visited several dioceses and spoke with several bishops regarding possible sites for a new mother and baby home. The congregation wanted to establish a home in Dublin but failed to get the permission of the Archbishop of Dublin.⁶ The DLGPH report for 1930-31 stated that the congregation had agreed to establish a second mother and baby home in Ireland and was considering some sites in Limerick and Tipperary.
- 19.14 Having considered the available options the congregation decided to buy a manor house and estate at Corville, Roscrea, North Tipperary, at a cost of £6,000.⁷ The Bishop of Killaloe, Dr Fogarty, agreed to the congregation's request to establish a home in his diocese.⁸ The main house, described as 'a large structure in the Grecian style',⁹ was converted for use as a mother and baby home along the lines of that already established at Bessborough. The first superioress was Mother de Sales Gilmartin who was reportedly 'very sympathetic' towards the women entering Sean Ross but was upset to see girls from families she had known in Offaly being admitted to her institution and asked to be relieved from her position after two years. She was replaced in 1932 by Sister Rosemonde McCarthy.¹⁰
- 19.15 In July 1931, Bishop Fogarty visited Sean Ross, which was reportedly 'in full working order' and ready for the reception of single women and their infants.¹¹ Mrs Crofts visited county homes in Tipperary and in neighbouring counties to encourage health authorities to send 'first offender' unmarried mothers who applied for public assistance to Sean Ross. The Minister for Local Government and Public Health wrote to health boards in Tipperary and in neighbouring counties recommending that they direct single women with one child seeking assistance to Sean Ross¹² and that all single expectant women who sought admission to a county home should be directed to Sean Ross also.¹³ Mother De Sales wrote to

⁶ Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, *Diaries of the Mother General*.

⁷ Killaloe Diocesan Archive

⁸ Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, *Council minutes*, 23 September 1930.

⁹ NUI Galway, Landed Estates Database, Estate: O'Byrne; Corville. <http://landedestates.nuigalway.ie>

¹⁰ *Nenagh Guardian*, 13 August 1988.

¹¹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 4 July 1931.

¹² *The Nationalist* (Tipperary), 22 July 1931.

¹³ *Nenagh Guardian*, 25 July 1931.

local health authorities to inform them that women living in Sean Ross would be taught 'cooking, housework and needlework' and that she envisaged that a dairy and poultry farm would be established onsite where women would be 'employed and trained'.¹⁴ The congregational council minutes show that after a few months in operation Sean Ross was 'already crowded'.¹⁵

- 19.16 In May 1931, Mother De Sales told the North Tipperary board that the rates applicable were 12s 6d a week for expectant women and £1 1s (21 shillings) a week for mother and child. She recommended that expectant women should be admitted directly to Sean Ross rather than going through a county home. The board agreed that Dr Heenan, medical officer to Sean Ross, would be empowered to admit patients directly to the home and that the local health authorities would be notified of all admissions.¹⁶
- 19.17 In May 1931 the DLGPH wrote to the Offaly Board of Health suggesting that the 26 unmarried mothers living in Tullamore county home should be transferred to Sean Ross.¹⁷ In support of the suggestion, the chairman of the board said that the 26 women in question were 'mere girls' and first time mothers and that every effort should be made to teach them how to become 'self-supporting'. While the Offaly councillors did not oppose the suggestion in principle, some raised concerns regarding the cost of hiring staff to take on the work performed by these women in the county home.¹⁸
- 19.18 Although the Clare Board of Health had agreed to implement the ministerial direction to transfer single woman and their infants to Sean Ross, the matron of the County Nursery, Kilrush, objected to the move. The cost of maintenance for a woman and child in Kilrush was 24s a week and the Clare board was agreeable to the reduced rate of 21s a week applicable at Sean Ross. However, the matron at Kilrush protested on the basis that if women were transferred from Kilrush to Sean Ross the board would have to replace them with five paid employees to assume their duties (see Chapter 16). The board decided that their duty to unmarried mothers was to 'reform rather than punish them' and that the training that women would receive in Sean Ross would provide them with the prospect of future

¹⁴ *Offaly Independent*, 27 June 1931.

¹⁵ Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, General Chapter 1933, Report of Superior General.

¹⁶ North Tipperary Board of Public Assistance Minutes, January-June 1931.

¹⁷ *Nenagh Guardian*, 30 May 1931.

¹⁸ *Offaly Independent*, 30 May 1931.

employment in new surroundings.¹⁹ The Clare board wrote to Bishop Fogarty to get his views on the matter.

19.19 In his reply, Bishop Fogarty said that the system in operation in Sean Ross was 'admirable' and led to 'merciful results' whereby many women were placed in situations and were 'permanently reclaimed'. He also included a description of what he described as the three classes of women who were admitted to Sean Ross:

- a) The feeble or weak-minded sort (and a great many of them are such) who will never be able to take care of themselves and are easy victims to the wicked. For these I can see only one form of protection, namely, collect them into institutions under the care of the Nuns. As long as they remain in such institutions, they are quiet, happy and inoffensive, and for the most part they are willing to take shelter in such institutions. I know of no such institutions at present in Ireland. It is a pity the Local Government Department would not take up the question and provide such an institution as far as it may be necessary.
- b) The second class of these offenders are girls who are naturally decent but who have fallen through accident or environment. Girls of that class are dealt with by the Nuns at Sean Ross, who get them in a good many cases, as I have said, safe occupation outside and they nearly all remain right: many of them get married.
- c) The third class is that of women of a wild and vicious nature, who are a harmful influence wherever they prevail. They are neither amenable to religion outside, nor will they consent to abide permanently in religious institutions. Some of them are taken as penitents into houses under the care of the Good Shepherd Nuns and remain there.²⁰

19.20 The Clare board reportedly approved Bishop Fogarty's letter in every detail and one councillor said that the letter 'hits the nail on the head from every point of view'.²¹

19.21 The Clare board also considered the matter of single women with two or more children who were not eligible for admission to either Sean Ross or Bessborough.

¹⁹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 7 November 1931.

²⁰ Killaloe Diocesan Archives, Fogarty Collection

²¹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 2 December 1933.

The secretary of the board said that there was no legal power to detain such women in Kilrush if they wished to take their discharge. However, he pointed out that the only obligation on any woman who decided to leave the Kilrush home was that she must take her child with her and it was this obligation that prevented most women from leaving. The board then proposed to maintain children unaccompanied in Sean Ross so that their mothers could, if they wished, discharge themselves from the Kilrush home to take up employment.²² However, the DLGPH would not agree to this proposal.²³

19.22 In September 1931 a Memorandum of Agreement was made between the Tipperary North Riding Board of Health and Public Assistance and 'Shan (*sic*) Ross Abbey',²⁴ Roscrea, for the reception, maintenance and treatment of persons eligible for relief in institutions not provided or maintained by the board. Sean Ross was approved by the Minister for Local Government and Public Health for this purpose. This agreement was made under Article 15 of the *Tipperary (North Riding) County Scheme Order*²⁵ which was an order under the *Local Government (Temporary Provisions) Act 1923*.²⁶ The agreement stated that the superioress would be the sole judge of applicants' suitability for admission to the home, and in consultation with the institutional medical officer, their suitability for discharge. The superioress undertook to provide residents with 'proper food, medicines, accommodation, nursing and medical attendance for such period as may be necessary'. The board agreed to pay 12s 6d a week for expectant women and £1 1s a week for a mother and 'firstborn' child. This fee was to cover the cost of maintenance, training and treatment of women and children maintained by the board in Sean Ross. The agreement did not include any express provision for inspections either by the North Tipperary board or the DLGPH, but, as is set out below, such inspections did take place.

19.23 The ministerial directive to transfer single expectant women and single women with a child to Sean Ross was not universally welcomed. In South Tipperary, the cost of maintaining a woman and child in Cashel county home was 12s a week, seven shillings less than the cost of maintenance in Sean Ross. One South Tipperary councillor speculated that the number of single expectant women seeking to be

²² *Nenagh Guardian*, 5 March 1932.

²³ *Nenagh Guardian*, 30 January 1933.

²⁴ As is explained in the 5th Interim Report, Shan Ross is the correct pronunciation; Sean Ross is the correct spelling.

²⁵ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1924/sro/935/made/en/print>

²⁶ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1923/act/9/enacted/en/html> ; see Chapter 1.

maintained by the board would double if they thought they were to be accommodated in a mansion such as Sean Ross and concluded that women were very well off in the county home and should be left there. Another councillor reminded the board that every Poor Law Commission that ever sat had recommended that single women and their children should be accommodated outside of the county home system and that the clergy of the country approved of the system in operation at Sean Ross. The chairman of the board declared that they would not be altogether led by the clergy and that the board was not authorised to incur the extra expense involved.²⁷ In late September, Mrs Crofts addressed the South Tipperary Board and convinced them to accept the ministerial directive to admit single expectant women to Sean Ross instead of Cashel county home.²⁸

The 1930s

19.24 The DLGPH report for the year 1932–33 stated that, in the period June 1931 to March 1932, 85 women were admitted to Sean Ross and 74 babies were either born or admitted there in the same period. In its first full year of operation, April 1932–March 1933, 173 women were admitted. It was immediately obvious that infant mortality was a problem. The report noted, without comment, that 35 infants had died in the home during this period. The congregational records show that the Superior General was concerned about infant mortality at Sean Ross. She acknowledged that ‘the babies in Roscrea were not doing well’ and sent Sister Agatha from Liverpool to Sean Ross to investigate the matter.²⁹

19.25 In May 1934, the secretary of the North Tipperary Board of Health visited Sean Ross and reported as follows:

The Home is in the charge of the Order of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. It is not under the control of any Local Authority. It caters for different counties, and the charge for maintenance and treatment is a per capita one. In the case of Clare, the charge is 10s per head per week for each mother and child. The number of unmarried mothers and children in the Home from this county on the day of my visit was 27 and 40 respectively.

The various wards and nurseries in the Home are large and well ventilated. The beds in use are of modern type, and the clothing and bedding are in good

²⁷ *Nenagh Guardian*, 25 July 1931.

²⁸ *Nenagh Guardian*, 3 October 1931.

²⁹ Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, *Diaries of the Mother General*, May 1932.

condition and spotlessly clean. The nurseries deserve special mention, as the babies, their clothing, cots and surroundings are kept in such clean condition that only by untiring attention of a highly trained staff could it be accomplished. Central heating and electric light are installed, and all other requirements necessary for the comfort of the patients, including spacious day hall, and playrooms for the children are available.

The food supplied to the patients is the best available. The milk used is supplied from a herd of milk cows kept on the farm attached to the Home. Other cattle and sheep are kept, consequently all the fresh meat consumed in the Home is supplied from the farm stock. All the bread (plain and fancy) required is baked in a modern bakery in the Home. The garden attached supplies all the vegetables required, so it can be seen that the chief articles of food for this Home must be of good quality.

The unmarried mothers in the institution are admirably dealt with. They are employed at occupations which, in the opinion of the Reverend Mother, they are adapted to. In the bakery, girls are trained to do all classes of baking and, judging by the results, they are highly efficient at their work. In the laundry others are employed at making and repairing clothing and bedding, knitting stockings etc. In the kitchen, where central range and electric cookers are installed, the patients attend to the cooking for the entire House. In the dairy, poultry farm and garden, others are employed.

From the foregoing it can be seen that the unmarried mother at this Home is given every opportunity of becoming proficient in every phase of domestic and other work. Supervision appears to be strict, but the manner in which it is exercised does not tend to impress on the patients that they are in the Home under duress as they all appear happy and contented. I regret to say that the Home is getting overcrowded. At present an extension is being provided at a cost of £28,000. If the good work of the Reverend Mother and Sisters in charge of the Home was more fully realised, the necessity for such an extension may not be necessary as some steps would be taken to assist in a practical manner the work performed by the Order at Sean Ross and also at Bessborough.³⁰

19.26 The DLGPH report for the year ending March 1934 stated that 193 women, 191 of whom were single expectant women, were admitted to Sean Ross. In the same

³⁰ *Nenagh Guardian*, 12 May 1934.

period, 124 women were discharged: 97 to their parents' home; 22 to other institutions and five married.

- 19.27 The report noted that there were 160 births recorded during the year and 60 infants had died. The report noted that the high infant mortality rate in mother and baby homes generally was 'caused by an epidemic of some kind, measles, whopping cough, etc., which spreads quickly among the children and wipes out the weaklings'. It noted that the nurseries were laid out to accommodate too many children and the provision for isolation was not adequate. It further stated that, in the new building at Sean Ross, no nursery would accommodate more than thirty children and provision for isolation was being made 'on a much more generous scale that has been possible heretofore'.
- 19.28 Following her visit to Sean Ross in March 1934 the Superior General reported that she had found 'a decided improvement in everything', that she was very pleased with the superioress, Sister Rosemonde, and with 'the spirit of the whole place'.
- 19.29 In February 1934, a man lodged a claim against the Laois Board of Health alleging ill-treatment of his 23 year old daughter in Sean Ross, which led to her death.³¹ A subsequent sworn inquiry heard that Dr Heenan, the Sean Ross medical officer, had suspected that the deceased woman was suffering from venereal disease. As there was no isolation ward or facilities for dealing with such cases in Sean Ross, Dr Heenan arranged for the woman to be admitted to Abbeyleix Hospital. At Abbeyleix, the medical officer, Dr Maher, did not examine the woman and refused to admit her. He stated that 'an unmarried mother with venereal disease should not have been sent to his hospital' and that 'he could not see his way to admit her to the only accommodation in the county for married women'. He directed the ambulance driver to take the woman to the county hospital, Portlaoise. In Portlaoise, the medical officer, Dr O'Connell, examined the woman but also refused to admit her stating that there was no provision for dealing with maternity cases there. He directed the ambulance driver to take the woman to her own home. She was treated in her home by a local dispensary officer but died some days later. Following a sworn enquiry, the Minister for Local Government and Public Health found that the medical officer in Abbeyleix had shown 'an entire disregard of his duty' to provide for the treatment of the woman and that he had

³¹ *Kilkenny People*, 24 February 1934.

'used this instance as a test case to press his own view regarding institutional arrangements for such cases'. The minister concluded that the medical officer's whole attitude demonstrated 'a callous disregard to the interests of the patient and was most objectionable'. It subsequently transpired that the woman did not have venereal disease and had died of sepsis. The minister insisted that this material fact be put on public record so that 'the unfortunate girl who died is cleared of this charge against her'.³²

- 19.30 The DLGPH report for the year ending March 1935 stated that 187 women, of whom 168 were single expectant women, were admitted to Sean Ross. The department noted that in the same period, 87 women were discharged with their children and that two maternal deaths had occurred. There were 154 births and 52 infant deaths. Following her visit to Sean Ross in February 1935 the Superior General reported that she 'found a crowded house' and 'all very well'.
- 19.31 The Hospitals Commission *First general report 1933-34* reported that the demand for services at Sean Ross was so great that overcrowding in the institution 'was evident almost from the beginning'. Additional accommodation, as well as improvements to existing accommodation, was necessary and 'a matter of extreme urgency' as infant mortality in the home was 'exceptionally high'. Overcrowding and unsuitable accommodation were the chief causes of the high infant mortality. The Commission had undertaken 'a thorough investigation' of plans for the extension and reconstruction of the home and recommended that a grant of £29,595 would be made to from the Hospitals Trust Fund.
- 19.32 The maternity hospital at Sean Ross (which was known as St Gerard's) was licensed under the *Registration of Maternity Homes Act 1934* on 1 January 1935.
- 19.33 In September 1935, Bishop Fogarty blessed the foundation stone of the new Chapel of St Michael the Archangel at Sean Ross.³³ The *Nenagh Guardian* reported that 'Roscrea was jubilant' as the bishop led a local troop of boy scouts and 'hundreds of townspeople' through the streets of the town and on to Sean Ross. The ceremony, described as 'very impressive', was reportedly witnessed by 'a very large gathering' which included 'inmates' from the 'rescue house for young

³² *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 23 March 1935.

³³ *Irish Press*, 25 September 1935.

women' who were dressed in 'brown garb'.³⁴ One year later, another large crowd attended a high mass at Sean Ross to mark the opening of St Michael's Chapel. Although Bishop Fogarty's sermon was almost exclusively focused on the Spanish Civil War, he did refer to the work undertaken at Sean Ross:

Pity for the unhappy Magdalenes of society has created here at Sean Ross a shelter for unmarried mothers and their children, often the victims of misfortune, under the care of the virgin Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. It is a charity of infinite mercy and value. I am grateful to the good nuns for undertaking, at the request of the Government, this work, so arduous in nature. I admire their heroism and self-sacrifice.³⁵

- 19.34 In the year ending March 1936, the DLGPH reported that 188 women, 176 of whom were single expectant women, were admitted to Sean Ross. In the same period 80 women were discharged with their children. The department noted that 80 discharged children were placed at nurse by their mothers; 31 were boarded out and 12 were 'adopted'. There were 157 births and 54 infant deaths; the report did not comment on the death rate.
- 19.35 In October 1936, an outbreak of diphtheria occurred among children at Sean Ross. The chairman of the North Tipperary Board of Health claimed that outbreaks of the disease were a common occurrence in the institution and that some infected infants were less than two weeks old. He said that something must be wrong somewhere and that the board should act to stamp out the epidemic without delay. Dr McCarthy, County Medical Officer for North Tipperary, confirmed that such epidemics had been a regular occurrence at Sean Ross over the previous three years and that 15 children from the institution, including 13 babies, were being treated for diphtheria in the Roscrea district hospital. Dr McCarthy noted that, although the district hospital had accommodation for only eight children, 21 children in total were receiving treatment for diphtheria there.³⁶
- 19.36 Dr McCarthy claimed that the regular outbreaks of epidemic diphtheria in Tipperary did not originate among the people of Co Tipperary itself but among the residents of Sean Ross. However, it is clear from coverage of North Tipperary Board of Health meetings in the *Nenagh Guardian* that diphtheria was endemic in most

³⁴ *Nenagh Guardian*, 28 September 1935.

³⁵ *Evening Herald*, 9 September 1936.

³⁶ *Nenagh Guardian*, 24 October 1936.

North Tipperary districts during this period. On Dr McCarthy's recommendation, the board decided to cease admissions to Sean Ross until the diphtheria epidemic waned and recommended that all new admissions to the home would receive active immunisation against diphtheria. The board acknowledged that Sister Rosemonde was 'perfectly agreeable' to any suggestions which the board might make to further address the matter.³⁷ However, the issue of who would pay for these precautionary public health measures was cause for debate.

- 19.37 The North Tipperary board decided that the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary should not bear the expense of an anti-diphtheria intervention at Sean Ross and that all nine counties maintaining women and children in the home had a shared responsibility for the cost. The DLGPH supported the board's proposal and health authorities in North Tipperary, Laois, Offaly, Carlow and Kildare agreed to meet the costs associated with the immunisation scheme. However, health authorities in South Tipperary, Clare, Kilkenny and Wexford refused to accept liability.³⁸ The refusal of the Clare Board of Health is of particular interest. Several women admitted to Sean Ross from County Clare had been identified as diphtheria carriers. Clare was the last county to employ a fulltime county medical officer and the Clare Board of Health had not implemented an anti-diphtheria immunisation scheme. Efforts made by individual doctors to introduce anti-diphtheria schemes in Clare were thwarted by the Irish Medical Union and it seems likely that many women and children admitted to Sean Ross from Clare had been exposed to virulent forms of diphtheria.³⁹
- 19.38 The Roscrea district hospital did not have adequate facilities to deal with the increased demand for services resulting from the establishment of Sean Ross. The county medical officer said that the fever hospital, a stand-alone building located behind the district hospital, was designed to accommodate ten patients and was frequently overcrowded. The facilities available there were 'inadequate according to proper fever hospital standards'.⁴⁰ The North Tipperary board's report for 1937 stated that admissions to the fever hospital were frequently suspended

³⁷ *Nenagh Guardian*, 24 October 1936.

³⁸ *Nenagh Guardian*, 13 August 1938.

³⁹ See Michael Dwyer, *Strangling Angel: Diphtheria and childhood immunization in Ireland*, (Liverpool, 2018).

⁴⁰ *Nenagh Guardian*, 11 April 1936.

due to 'gross over-crowding' and the lack of accommodation for patients suffering from infectious disease was reportedly 'a matter of extreme gravity'.⁴¹

- 19.39 In August 1937, a meeting of the North Tipperary board heard that Roscrea fever hospital was staffed by one nurse and one cook and that the board had been relying on adult patients admitted from Sean Ross to help nurse patients suffering from infectious disease.⁴² When the county medical officer, Dr McCarthy, inspected the fever hospital in 1937, he found one nurse caring, or attempting to care for, 27 fever patients.⁴³ The North Tipperary board did not approve Dr McCarthy's recommendation to hire additional nursing staff, on the grounds of increased expenditure, and gave no consideration to paying women from Sean Ross for their services in the fever hospital. In fact, the records suggest that although these women were admitted from Sean Ross as patients themselves, they were expected to nurse fellow patients, and in doing so, were exposed to a myriad of infectious diseases.
- 19.40 Throughout the 1930s, all cases of diphtheria notified in North Tipperary were transferred to Roscrea fever hospital for treatment. Dr McCarthy had notified the board that children admitted there with ailments other than diphtheria were contracting diphtheria in the institution. These children subsequently either died of the disease in the institution or were discharged while still infectious.⁴⁴ It is likely that women and children admitted to Roscrea fever hospital from Sean Ross were exposed to virulent forms of diphtheria. The fact that diphtheria was the leading cause of infant mortality in Sean Ross during 1936 and 1937 strongly suggests that women and children discharged from Roscrea fever hospital to Sean Ross brought diphtheria into the institution on their return.
- 19.41 An article co-authored by county medical officer for North Tipperary, Dr O'Regan, and the institutional medical officer to Sean Ross, Dr Heenan, which appeared in the *Irish Journal of Medical Science*, referred to 'endemic diphtheria in an institution for the care of unmarried mothers'. Although the institution is not named in the article there is little doubt that the study related to Sean Ross and the endemic nature of diphtheria which prevailed there from 1935 to 1942. The

⁴¹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 4 June 1938.

⁴² *Nenagh Guardian*, 7 August 1937.

⁴³ *Nenagh Guardian*, 13 November 1937.

⁴⁴ *Nenagh Guardian*, 18 March 1939.

authors described the layout of the maternity building and how the wards were laid out over two floors and concluded that the free communication between the wards facilitated the spread of communicable disease in general, and diphtheria in particular.⁴⁵

- 19.42 The institutional records compiled in Sean Ross and analysed by the Commission show that infant mortality peaked in 1936; 95 infant deaths were notified that year. The cause of death is known in 88 of these cases; 28 were notified as deaths due to diphtheria. Further analysis of known causes of death which occurred during 1936 show that 59 infant deaths were directly attributable to infectious disease: diphtheria (28); gastroenteritis (12); sepsis (ten); bronchitis (four); influenza (two); measles (two) and chickenpox (one). A further 12 deaths attributed to marasmus (five); pneumonia (five) and convulsions (two) may also have been due to underlying infections. Analysis of infant deaths in 1937 shows comparable results. Of the 54 infant deaths notified during 1937, 35 were caused by direct exposure to infectious disease: diphtheria (12), sepsis (ten), gastroenteritis (six), influenza (five) and tuberculosis (two).
- 19.43 Analysis of infant mortality in Sean Ross in the mid to late 1930s shows that a significant number of deaths occurred in children who had contracted a communicable disease, most commonly diphtheria, in the days after their mothers had returned to Sean Ross from Roscrea fever hospital. In one instance, a 22-year-old woman was transferred from the home to the fever hospital. The woman returned to the nursery at Sean Ross three weeks later. Soon after her return this woman's six-month-old infant contracted diphtheria and was transferred to the fever hospital. The child died there one month later. In 1937, the child of a 20-year-old woman returning from Roscrea fever hospital fell ill and subsequently died. Although incidents such as these were most common in 1936 and 1937, similar instances of infant deaths following the return of the mother from Roscrea fever hospital can be identified up to 1945.
- 19.44 For the year ending March 1937, the DLGPH reported that 146 women were admitted to Sean Ross, 172 women were discharged, and 35 children were boarded out. One maternal death was notified in this period. One hundred and

⁴⁵ O'Regan, Heenan, Murray, 'Diphtheria in infants', *Irish Journal of Medical Science*, 6: 116 (1942).

twenty births and 60 infant deaths were recorded; no comment was made about this very high death rate.

- 19.45 The DLGPH report for the year ending March 1938 stated that 171 women were admitted to Sean Ross. In the same period 93 women were reported as being discharged to their parents; 36 were discharged to take up employment and three married. Three maternal deaths were notified in this period. Forty seven children were discharged with their mothers; 20 were boarded out and 12 were adopted, either privately or through a society. One hundred and thirty eight children were either born in or admitted to Sean Ross during the year and 54 infant deaths were recorded. Although this represented a decrease on the previous year, infant mortality rates at Sean Ross were still very high.
- 19.46 For the year ending March 1939, the DLGPH reported that 158 women were admitted to Sean Ross. In the same period 101 women were discharged to their parents; 19 were discharged to take up employment and six married. One maternal death was notified. Sixty six children were discharged with their mothers; 13 were boarded out and five were 'adopted' either privately or through a society. One hundred and forty eight children were either born in or admitted to Sean Ross and 27 infant deaths were recorded. This represented a considerable reduction in infant mortality and the lowest infant mortality rate recorded in the institution since its opening in 1931. However, even this comparatively low infant mortality rate was still three times the national rate.
- 19.47 The DLGPH report for the year ending March 1940 reported that 153 women were admitted to Sean Ross. In the same period, 92 women were discharged to their parents; 25 were discharged to take up employment and two married. Seventy three children were discharged with their mothers, eight were boarded out and five were adopted. One hundred and forty three children were born in or admitted to Sean Ross and 19 infant deaths were notified. This represented a new low in the infant mortality rate at Sean Ross. In August 1939, Dr Heenan, the medical officer to Sean Ross Abbey, reported on the health of children under his care. He stated:
- It gives me great pleasure to mention that the health of the children in Sean Ross Abbey was very good during the year. At the present moment the general health is also very good.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ *Nenagh Guardian*, 26 August 1939.

- 19.48 Infant deaths in Sean Ross during 1939 were not as frequent as in previous years. However, in the eight years from the opening of the institution in 1931 to the date of Dr Heenan's statement, over 450 of the over 1,300 children born in, or admitted to, Sean Ross had died in infancy.

The 1940s

- 19.49 The decrease in infant mortality at Sean Ross did not last long. The DLGPH report for the year 1940/1 reported that, in the year ending March 1941, 162 children were born or admitted to the home and 58 infant deaths were recorded.
- 19.50 In 1938 the DLGPH had agreed that counties maintaining women and children in Sean Ross should meet the proportionate cost of an anti-diphtheria immunisation scheme undertaken in the institution between 1 January 1937 and 31 March 1938. However, in January 1940, the department was made aware that nasal swabbing to test for diphtheria and anti-diphtheria immunisation had continued at Sean Ross and that a bill of £419 9s11d had been issued by the North Tipperary board to the relevant county councils. Both Dr O'Regan, county medical officer for North Tipperary and Dr Heenan, medical officer to Sean Ross, told the department that the steps taken were necessary 'to combat recurrent outbreaks of diphtheria from 1937 to 1940'. The recurrent outbreaks of diphtheria at Sean Ross appear to have been unique to that institution; outbreaks of diphtheria were rare or non-existent in other mother and baby homes. The DLGPH issued a directive to the authorities in the five mother and baby homes (Pelletstown, Bessborough, Tuam, Sean Ross and Castlepollard) recommending that swabbing of patients to test for diphtheria should be discontinued and promoted isolation and prophylactic treatment as the most appropriate way to combat diphtheria in an institutional setting. In 1941, six adults living in Sean Ross contracted diphtheria in a mild form. Although Dr Heenan reportedly 'got this outbreak under control' the infection spread to nine infants aged between six and 27 days old. Dr Heenan did not recognise the presence of diphtheria among the infants and failed to make a diagnosis until one of them died. All nine afflicted infants subsequently died. Dr Heenan's report on the outbreak succinctly stated:

Nine cases - Nine deaths - Mortality 100 per cent.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ O'Regan, Heenan, Murray, 'Diphtheria in infants', *Irish Journal of Medical Science*, 1942 6: 116.

- 19.51 In March 1942, the county medical officer, Dr O'Regan, notified the DLGPH of another outbreak of diphtheria among infants at Sean Ross. In this instance, seven infants, all under three weeks old, had contracted diphtheria and two new admissions to the home had been clinically identified as diphtheria 'carriers'. Dr O'Regan stated that he and Dr Heenan had done everything possible to limit the spread of the infection and asked the department to send a medical inspector to investigate the matter. In a subsequent letter to the department, Dr O'Regan suggested that a programme of mass anti-diphtheria immunisation should be undertaken at Sean Ross but said that Dr Heenan, had opposed the idea. Dr O'Regan asked the DLGPH to reconsider its previous directive regarding the swabbing of new admissions to the institution and requested permission to resume this practice at Sean Ross. The department refused to agree to the re-introduction of swabbing and Dr Heenan refused to administer anti-diphtheria serum as a preventive measure and limited the administration of anti-diphtheria serum to confirmed cases of diphtheria only. Diphtheria remained prevalent in Sean Ross throughout 1942 and 1943 and 12 further diphtheria deaths were notified in this period. Of the 91 diphtheria cases notified in North Tipperary during 1944, 20% occurred in Sean Ross.⁴⁸
- 19.52 In March 1944, Dr O'Regan notified the DLGPH that an outbreak of typhoid had occurred at Sean Ross. Three women had initially tested positive for the disease and within days clinical diagnosis was established in 16 women. All affected women were transferred from Sean Ross to fever hospitals in their home counties. Three were transferred to Roscrea fever hospital. Dr O'Regan cautioned that he expected more cases to develop and that women who could not be transferred to hospital would be treated at Sean Ross. By the beginning of April, 25 typhoid cases had been confirmed in the institution. Women who had been discharged from Sean Ross before the outbreak had been identified were contacted and tested for the disease. A section of the institution was reconfigured to act as a fever ward and isolation unit and the matron hired two 'fever trained nurses'. By mid-April, 28 women were being treated for typhoid in the institution. Dr O'Regan reported that the matron required additional trained nurses to cope with the growing number of patients but was unable to get suitable staff. Two members of the congregation were drafted in to help in the wards one of whom was the former matron of the Bessborough Maternity Hospital, Sister Kyran, who had been

⁴⁸ *Nenagh Guardian*, 26 August 1944

removed from her position at the request of the DLGPH a year earlier (see Chapter 18). Women from the unaffected portion of the institution could not be brought in to assist as they risked exposure to infection. Dr O'Regan advised the department that 'we hope to straighten things out soon'.

19.53 Throughout April the number of confirmed typhoid cases at Sean Ross continued to rise. Dr O'Regan instructed a workman to inspect the sewage disposal system; it was found to be defective and the workman contracted the disease through his endeavours. On inspection it was found that crude sewage from the convent and nursery buildings was being diverted into a 'bog drain' which also took effluent from the maternity building where the outbreak originated. This effluent drained into an adjacent river and Dr O'Regan issued warnings to the inhabitants of Roscrea that the use of river water for any purposes whatsoever was dangerous. Dr O'Regan investigated the water supply to the home (Roscrea town chlorinated supply) and the methods employed to prepare and cook food as possible causes of the outbreak. Suspicion fell on a herdsman employed at the home and on women who had been admitted in the weeks prior to the first confirmed case. The affected section of the home was isolated, women were inspected every morning to determine if they had developed any symptoms and were directed to wash their hands after using the lavatory. In one of his updates to the DLGPH, Dr O'Regan reported that:

The use and abuse of the lavatories by the type of girls who enter this institution and who have not been used to such amenities was such as to convince me that the spread of the disease was due to infection from the lavatory seats.

19.54 While Dr O'Regan blamed women living in Sean Ross for the outbreak he later acknowledged that two workmen had also contracted typhoid. However, he could offer no explanation as to how they had contracted the disease.

19.55 In his annual report for 1944, Dr O'Regan reported that 35 cases of typhoid had occurred during the outbreak at Sean Ross and that four people had died. However, Dr O'Regan failed to note that a further three women, all clinically confirmed typhoid cases who were transferred from Sean Ross to fever hospitals in other districts, had also died. In the case of one woman, who had been transferred to a hospital in Laois, the GRO record states that her death was due to puerperal sepsis even though she had been clinically diagnosed with typhoid prior

to her discharge from Sean Ross. Dr O'Regan also said that most infant deaths during 1944 were caused by pneumonia, bronchitis, diarrhoea and enteritis, premature birth and congenital debility.⁴⁹ However, in a later correspondence to the DLGPH, Dr O'Regan reported that six infants born to typhoid infected women had also died. While Dr O'Regan surmised that these infant deaths may have been the result of typhoid septicaemia, no infant death which occurred in Sean Ross during 1944 was notified as a typhoid related death to the GRO.

Inspection 1944

19.56 In September 1944, Miss Litster inspected Sean Ross. At the time of her visit 131 women and 118 children were living in the home. She noted that all except one woman were maintained by local authorities. Miss Litster stated that the superioress, Sister Rosemonde, told her that she did not propose to admit private patients in the future.

19.57 Miss Litster noted that there were 28 children aged over two years old in Sean Ross at the time of her inspection and reported on them as follows:

Clare: Four children. One of these children is mentally defective and the local authority has been requested to send her to a suitable institution. She is six years old and not a suitable companion for normal children.

North Tipperary: Seven children. One of these children will be shortly going out to his grandmother. Four are 4 years old. Two are over 3 years. These 6 are normal, healthy children and should be boarded out.

Kilkenny: Five children. All five are over 3 years old and all healthy and normal.

Kildare: Four children. All four are about 3 years old and are healthy and normal.

South Tipperary: Three children. These three are over 2 years. Only one is fit for boarding out.

Offaly: Three children. One is 2 years old, one 3 and one 4. All are healthy and normal.

Wexford: Two children. Neither is fit for boarding out.

19.58 In October 1944, Miss Litster raised concerns with the DLGPH regarding the 28 healthy and 'normal' children aged over two years who were maintained by local

⁴⁹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 11 August 1945.

authorities in Sean Ross. She wanted the relevant local authorities to provide foster homes for these children. She acknowledged that the mothers of these children had been obliged to remain in Sean Ross for three or four years because the local authorities had failed to board out their children. She further acknowledged that such prolonged stays in the home led women to feel aggrieved and that they became 'stubborn and intractable'. The DLGPH wrote to all relevant local health authorities asking them to take immediate steps to have the children removed to suitable foster homes and to inform the department of the actions taken in this matter.

- 19.59 The Kildare board told the department that they had instructed their superintendent assistance officer to suggest suitable homes for children maintained by them in Sean Ross. The Clare board said that the medical officer at Sean Ross had informed them that the older children maintained by them in the home were not medically fit to be boarded out. The Tipperary South board told the department that they were actively seeking foster homes. The Tipperary North board said that they advertised for foster parents in the local press on two occasions and received only one application from a family living outside the county; all those who made applications to foster children wanted children aged ten years and over. The Kilkenny and Offaly boards also said that advertisements for foster parents in the local press failed to secure any suitable homes in those counties.
- 19.60 During 1945, the DLGPH continued to put pressure on the relevant local authorities to get foster homes for children maintained by them in Sean Ross. However, it appears that their efforts did not meet with any success. In February 1945, Sister Rosemonde wrote to Miss Litster to tell her that the institutional medical officer, Dr Hanley, had advised her to close the maternity hospital to new admissions due to overcrowding. She said that there was a mild outbreak of diphtheria in the hospital and that all patients had received anti-diphtheria immunisation treatment or were in the process of receiving preventive treatment. Sister Rosemonde further stated that the children aged two years and older, whom Miss Litster had seen on her last visit, were still in Sean Ross and that the presence of these children and their mothers was 'a great drawback to our work' and was a contributory factor in the overcrowding in the institution. She intimated that she had been asked to take patients from Waterford but that she could not do so due to the conditions in the institution.

- 19.61 In March 1945, Sister Rosemonde told the department that Sean Ross was at maximum capacity and closed to new admissions on Dr Hanley's advice. The department acknowledged the decision, made further enquiries about the children aged two and over who were living there and asked if it was stipulated in the agreement between Sean Ross and the local authorities maintaining women and children there that they would maintain children until they were two years old. Sister Rosemonde replied that the agreement did not specify any definite period for which women and children would be maintained but a former departmental inspector, Mrs Crofts, had deemed that children aged under two were unfit for boarding out; this, in effect, meant that women spent about two years in the home. Sister Rosemonde forwarded a list of the older children living in Sean Ross in March 1945. In spite of the departmental pressure on local authorities to arrange foster parents for these children, their number had increased from 28 in September 1944 to 31 in March 1945. Dr Hanley had passed 27 of the older children as medically fit for boarding out and four required medical treatment.
- 19.62 Boards of assistance in all counties continued to have difficulties in finding foster parents. They cited war-time conditions, the high cost of living and the boarding out rates of payment as major disincentives to couples who would have previously considered fostering a child.
- 19.63 In March 1945, Miss Litster noted that the position regarding accommodation for women was becoming serious as Sean Ross and Bessborough were closed to new entrants. The department wrote to the local authorities involved and told them that their failure to arrange boarding out of the older children was the cause of the closure to new entrants.
- 19.64 The local authorities concerned continued to tell the department that they were having trouble getting foster homes. Kilkenny county council said that they had removed six children from Sean Ross to Kilkenny county home, Thomastown, with a view to having the children boarded out from there. In a similar move, Laois county council transferred women and children maintained by them from Sean Ross to Portlaoise county home. Other local authorities reported that they had managed to get one or two suitable foster homes but that their efforts were largely fruitless.

- 19.65 In a bid to attract more applications from prospective foster parents, some local authorities, such as Offaly county council, increased the boarding out rate from 30s to 35s a month and advertised the revised rates in the local press. In other districts it was the assistance officers as opposed to prospective foster parents who required an incentive. In Kilkenny, assistance officers considered that extra foster homes would necessitate extra inspections for them and asked to be compensated for the extra work involved. Assistance officers were paid 2s 6d a year for each boarded out child in their district and the superintendent assistance officer advised that a rate of 10s for each child might be a good incentive for assistance officers to increase their efforts. The DLGPH agreed to the increased rate and ten applications for boarded out children were subsequently received in Kilkenny.
- 19.66 In October 1944 Miss Litster noted that the matron of the maternity hospital at Sean Ross, Sister Conrad McCarthy, was a registered nurse but not 'specially trained' in maternity work; she was assisted by two certified midwives. Miss Litster acknowledged that a considerable improvement in the health of infants in Sean Ross had been achieved since the appointment of Dr Hanley and, on her last inspection, she observed that 17 of 19 infants in the maternity hospital were breastfed. Although she reported that Sean Ross had not been overcrowded at the time of her visit, she recommended that a survey like those undertaken at Castlepollard and in the Tuam Children's Home⁵⁰ should be undertaken to determine the standard of accommodation available for mothers and children in the home.
- 19.67 In November 1944, the DLGPH engineering inspector, Mr Humphreys, inspected Sean Ross. Dr Dillon and Miss Litster accompanied him. The report of this visit gave a comprehensive overview of the physical layout of the institution:
- The original mansion was a three-storey building with a women's dining room in a semi-basement; reception rooms on the ground floor and three women's dormitories (plus two small rooms) on the first floor.
 - A three-storey extension to the main house had a 2,200 square feet recreation room in the semi-basement; two dormitories, two bedrooms and sanitary accommodation on the ground floor and a dormitory, two

⁵⁰ The Commission has not seen these surveys.

bedrooms, sanitary accommodation and a washroom with 31 wash-hand basins on the first floor.

- A wing off the main house had sleeping quarters for the congregation along with a laundry, stores and a kitchen.
- The maternity hospital had a pre-natal reception and isolation block which had been built in 1934. This contained a waiting room, lavatory, sink room, examination room, four-bed ward, bathroom, kitchenette, laundry and drying room on the ground floor and two three-bed wards, congregational accommodation and lavatories on the first floor. One patient was living in the reception and isolation block at the time of inspection.
- The maternity block itself was a two-storey building which had originally been the stables of the former mansion. The ground floor contained the labour ward, bathroom, kitchen, large dining room/day room and a babies' bathroom. The available facilities to bathe babies were in such poor condition that the institutional medical officer, Dr Hanley, prohibited their use. The upper floor contained two eight-bed dormitories for mothers, a ten-cot nursery for new-born infants, a Sister's bedroom, sink room and separate lavatory accommodation.
- Adjacent to the maternity block was another two-storey building housing pre-natal patients. The ground floor was used as a work room/dining room with a sanitary annex attached. The upper floor was a 14-bed dormitory also with sanitary annex attached. The women living in this dormitory each had a living space of 49 square feet and Mr Humphreys recommended that the number of beds should be reduced to give a more generous living space.
- The nursery block which had also been built 1934 was single storey except for an administration section located at one end of the building. The administration section had cubicle accommodation for the congregation on the upper floor and an entrance hall, kitchen and doctor's office on the ground floor. The single-story section of the building was 130 feet long and had day and night nurseries. At the time of inspection, the nurseries were being partitioned into one 70-foot and three 20-foot sections. There were 108 infants living in the nursery block at the time of inspection.

19.68 Mr Humphreys recorded that dormitories, particularly those located in the maternity block, afforded women a living space of around 90 square feet. However,

considering living conditions overall, he suggested that Sean Ross was not equipped to house the 144 women living there at the time and recommended that maximum occupancy should be capped at 120 women. This number was arrived at by apportioning 60 square feet of living space to every adult resident and by maintaining a minimum of five feet between beds. He concluded that there were not enough baths and WCs for the number of residents. There were 38 wash-hand basins, three baths and seven WCs to cater for the 144 women living there. He noted that this represented one bath for every 38 women and one WC for every 16 women.

- 19.69 Mr Humphreys said that the British Ministry of Health had recommended that infants and children aged under three years should be accommodated separately from older children and that each infant should have between 30 and 50 square feet living space. The ministry had also recommended that large numbers of infants should not be housed in the same building owing to the risk of infectious disease and that dormitories should not contain more than six to eight cots. Sean Ross did not accord with this as, at the time of the visit, the three large dormitories had 40, 24 and 20 cots respectively. Mr Humphreys recommended that the maximum nursery occupancy in Sean Ross should be 80 infants. Some of the accommodation could be partitioned to have six or eight infants in one room but this would not be possible in the nursery block. Mr Humphreys said that Dr Hanley had committed to reducing the number of infants in these rooms.
- 19.70 Dr Dillon also inspected the maternity hospital at Sean Ross. Sister Conrad McCarthy, a registered nurse, was matron of the hospital and was assisted by one certified midwife. Dr Dillon recommended that two additional members of the congregation, trained as midwives, were required to run the hospital efficiently. The hospital had four wards with a combined total of 11 beds. In the year ending November 1944, 147 babies were delivered in the hospital and ten infant deaths (five stillborn, five neonatal) were notified.
- 19.71 In December 1944, the Chief Medical Officer at the DLGPH, Dr Deeny, and a departmental colleague visited Sean Ross. A subsequent letter from Sister Rosemonde to Dr Deeny set out the issues discussed during the visit. Sister Rosemonde said that she was quite disturbed by the inferior quality of the labour ward. The building itself was low lying and badly lit and unsuitable for carrying out obstetric work as there was a complete lack of equipment other than that

necessary to deal with a normal delivery. The maternity ward had no sterilising unit, or any other sterilising equipment, and lacked even the most basic equipment to undertake emergency operations. Sr. Rosemonde told Dr Deeny that all patients were admitted to Sean Ross on their first pregnancy and that the percentage of difficult births was higher than hospitals admitting all maternity cases. The absence of equipment necessary to deal with emergencies meant that the maternity hospital could not treat women who presented with toxæmia and hæmorrhage.

- 19.72 Most women were admitted to Sean Ross between 24 and 28 weeks pregnant. Sister Rosemonde said that women admitted with any evidence of hæmorrhage at this stage of pregnancy constituted a 'grave source of worry' because she had no desire to refuse them admission to the home but worried that the maternity hospital was not adequately equipped to deal with them. She proposed building a new maternity section with a labour ward, sterilising room and combined operating theatre along with ante-partum and post-partum examination rooms all of which would be interconnected and fitted out with the necessary surgical instruments and equipment to deal with difficult births and emergencies.
- 19.73 Sister Rosemonde also discussed the DLGPH venereal disease scheme with Dr Deeny and said that the medical personnel at Sean Ross would cooperate with the department 'wholeheartedly' in this matter. She gave an undertaking that all women admitted to the home would undergo a prophylactic Wasserman reaction blood test for syphilis and that those women who tested positive would be sent for treatment on the basis that the DLGPH would bear the cost of the scheme.
- 19.74 Sister Rosemonde also raised the issue of anti-diphtheria immunisation. She told Dr Deeny that the practice in the institution was to swab the nose and throat of all women on admission and that those who tested positive for diphtheria were returned to fever hospitals in their home counties for treatment. She said that Dr Hanley had found that women admitted from rural areas had particularly low levels of immunity against diphtheria and consequently failed to confer any level of protection against the disease on their infants at birth. She stated that Dr Hanley proposed to immunise all women against diphtheria on admission and to immunise infants when they reached six months. She said that she supported Dr Hanley's proposal but added the caveat 'again the question of finance arises'.

19.75 Sister Rosemonde told Dr Deeny that the installation of an operating theatre, the introduction of an anti-diphtheria immunisation scheme and a commitment to investigating and making arrangements for the treatment of venereal disease at Sean Ross were all pressing and necessary interventions which would have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of women and children living in the institution. However, she stated that such services would involve considerable additional expenditure. She provided Dr Deeny with an overview of the financial position of the institution from 1938 to 1943 which showed that Sean Ross received £48,401 in capitation payments from the local health authorities and that expenditure over the same six-year period amounted to £60,892 suggesting that, in 1943, Sean Ross had accumulated deficits of £12,491. Sister Rosemonde said that the yearly deficits were offset by the work of the congregation who received no remuneration. She said that the capitation rate in 1944 (12s 6d for each woman each week) was not enough and would not cover the costs associated with the initiatives that the congregation wished to introduce.

It is clear from the above, and particularly when long term maintenance and repair costs are taken into consideration, that the present per capita figure is entirely inadequate for the efficient maintenance of the institution for its present basis, without any consideration of the proposals set out above.

19.76 Sister Rosemonde also raised the continuing problem of finding foster homes for children aged two years and over. There were 25 children aged between two and five years in the institution over the Christmas period in 1944. Sister Rosemonde thought it unfair that such children and their mothers should have to endure such extended stays and that their presence precluded the admission of 25 expectant women who Sister Rosemonde deemed 'were in more urgent need of our services'.

19.77 The final issue which Sister Rosemonde raised with Dr Deeny related to childhood vaccination in Sean Ross. She told Dr Deeny that an average of 170 children living in the institution required vaccination each year. She requested that the DLGPH provide the necessary vaccines free of charge and that the institutional medical officer receive the same remuneration as public health doctors who administered vaccines to children at public health clinics. It is not known if, or how, the department responded to this request.

- 19.78 Dr Deeny, in a briefing note, said that he had been pleased by the general condition of Sean Ross during his visit but conceded that the available accommodation for maternity patients was 'poor' and 'quite out of keeping with the rest of the Home'. He stated that he had considered the changes proposed by Sister Rosemonde and concluded that they would give 'very good accommodation for the amount she proposes to spend'. He said that the institutional medical officer, Dr Hanley, was a former assistant master of the Coombe maternity hospital and was an 'excellent doctor capable of advanced treatment'. Dr Deeny supported Dr Hanley's request for the upgrading of the labour wards and said that the proposed anti-diphtheria immunisation scheme was 'a necessary measure of precaution and treatment'. Dr Deeny concluded that the proposed measures would assist the congregation in carrying out their duties of 'caring for women during their confinement' and in their 'moral and physical rehabilitation afterwards'.
- 19.79 Overcrowding at Sean Ross continued throughout 1945 and 1946 and many children aged two years and over remained there with their mothers. Despite sustained pressure from the DLGPH, local authorities continued to struggle to find foster homes. In November 1945, Miss Litster inspected again and noted that 26 older children and their mothers were still living there.
- 19.80 In February 1946, the Mother Superior, Sister Brigid, wrote to the relevant local authorities to tell them that the institution was again 'much overcrowded' and that she could not admit any more expectant women until the older children and their mothers were discharged. In March 1946, she told the DLGPH that there were 181 women and 144 babies living in the institution and it was 'dangerously overcrowded'. She asked that the department would give the matter 'serious and urgent consideration'. At the department's request, the congregation provided the names of the older children and the responsible local authorities. The department again wrote to the local authorities concerned and instructed them to transfer the children to foster homes.
- 19.81 In April 1946, Clare County Council sent an ambulance to Sean Ross to collect six older children and their mothers and transfer them to Ennis county home; the county council disputed that four other children maintained by them were suitable for boarding out on health grounds. Some other county councils also disputed the suitability of children maintained by them for boarding out, also on health grounds. Other councils told the department that they had placed advertisements inviting

applications from prospective foster parents and some intimated that they were in the process of assessing applications. All county councils again reported difficulties in finding suitable foster homes. The superintendent assistance officer for Kildare wrote:

I would like to point out that there has been great difficulty in procuring homes for boarded out children in this County for some time past, every effort has been made and in May 1945 an advertisement was inserted in the local papers for foster homes. Applications were received from five persons, four of those were considered unsuitable. The fifth changed her mind and would not take a child.

- 19.82 This superintendent assistance officer decided to visit the families of women living in Sean Ross to explain the situation to them and to ask them if they were able to take their daughters and their children into the family home. He reported that the families he approached said that they 'were not on friendly terms' with their daughters since their admission to Sean Ross and would not be willing to take their children.
- 19.83 All other relevant county councils told the DLGPH that they were experiencing similar difficulties. It appears that the only option open to some councils was to transfer groups of women and older children from Sean Ross to county homes. The Tipperary North county manager contacted local authorities in counties who did not maintain women in Sean Ross to inquire if they had capacity to take boarded out children. All responses were negative.
- 19.84 Some long-term Sean Ross residents made independent efforts to find a place for their children and so enable them to leave. In April 1945, three residents applied for court orders for the committal of their children to industrial schools. The presiding judge asked the women what they intended to do when their children were committed. All three indicated that they wished to take up employment. Fearing an increase in such applications, the judge stated that he was hesitant to grant the orders unless the women were prepared to contribute towards the upkeep of their children in such institutions. All three children were subsequently committed to industrial schools.⁵¹ In May 1947, a further three residents sought court orders to commit their children to industrial schools. On this occasion, the

⁵¹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 21 April 1945.

solicitor to North Tipperary county council opposed the granting of such orders as all three women were maintained in Sean Ross by councils other than North Tipperary. The solicitor argued that if these children were committed to industrial schools in North Tipperary the council would be responsible for their maintenance until they reached 16 years of age. Orders for committal were made; the judge said that he did not have jurisdiction to make another county liable for the maintenance of children in North Tipperary industrial schools.⁵²

- 19.85 In March 1948, Miss Litster inspected Sean Ross. There were 152 women and 126 children, aged from newborn to three-and-a-half years, living there at the time. Miss Litster noted that the health of the children 'appeared excellent', that they were 'beautiful babies, well-nourished, healthy in appearance, clean and well-cared for'. Of the nine new-born babies in the maternity hospital, just one was bottlefed. Four older children were waiting to be boarded out. In the period 1 April 1947 to 12 March 1948, 120 children were born in the home or admitted after birth. Eighteen child deaths were recorded in the same period. While welcoming the reduction in infant mortality, the Department of Health considered that the rate was still too high. The causes of death were notified as septicaemia (five); congenital heart disease/failure (four); congenital syphilis (two); pneumonia (two); meningitis, marasmus, pertussis, mastoiditis and inter-cranial haemorrhage.
- 19.86 In the period 13 March 1948 to 9 February 1949, 148 live births and four stillbirths were recorded and 14 children were admitted after birth. Fifteen infant deaths were notified in the same period. Infants were aged between 22 hours and nine months at the time of death. The certified causes of death were: pneumonia (four); congenital syphilis (two); septicaemia (two); prematurity, spina bifida, atelectasis, icterus gravis neonatorum, gastritis, meningitis and congenital heart disease. The department suggested that the Sean Ross medical officer, Dr Hanley, should be contacted about the possibility of administering anti-pertussis vaccine along with the already established anti-diphtheria vaccination scheme in a bid to stamp out deaths due to whooping cough, even though no death due to whooping cough had been notified. The department also recommended that nursing staff in the home should be advised to administer penicillin to sick infants at an earlier stage to minimise the risk of death from pneumonia.

⁵² *Nenagh Guardian*, 17 May 1947.

Work and training at Sean Ross

19.87 In July 1946, a Land Commission Court heard that the Sean Ross Estate contained 63 acres of arable land, of which 45 acres were used for growing potatoes, wheat, oats and other vegetables. The Sisters kept 44 dairy cows, which produced 60 gallons of milk a day and they reared their own cattle. All farm produce was used in the home. A portion of the lands at Roscrea was bog land from which the Sisters cut turf, also for use in the home.⁵³

19.88 A former Mother Superior, Sister Hildegarde, later recalled:

We had the farm which supplied us with our own potatoes, vegetables and milk...We cut our own timber and turf, all of us, nuns, girls and workmen, worked on the bog.⁵⁴

19.89 In addition to providing training in 'cooking, housework and needlework' Sister Hildegarde stated that the congregation ran training schemes for the women in Sean Ross. Instructors ran courses in machine knitting and sewing and many women found employment in Clery's department store, Dublin. Women who worked in the convent bakery were also reportedly 'well sought after' and many went on to take up employment in the confectionary and catering industry.⁵⁵

Fire safety concerns

19.90 An inspection of Sean Ross by an architect in April 1946 raised issues about fire escapes. The recreation/assembly hall at the basement level of the three-storey extension had a large wooden stage at one end; it was used for the purpose of 'entertainment and cinematograph shows'. The architect recommended that it should not be used as it did not have enough exits in the event of a fire and because the floors of the overhead dormitories were not constructed of fire-resistant materials. The department's chief engineering advisor confirmed that the three-storey dormitory building constituted 'a grave fire risk' and acknowledged that the fire hazard in Sean Ross was 'acute'. However, the issue of who would pay for the installation of fire escapes and fire-resistant materials at Sean Ross was a matter of dispute, which remained unresolved until October 1950 when the Department of Health authorised a £7,000 grant to undertake the work.

⁵³ *Nenagh Guardian*, 6 July 1946.

⁵⁴ *Nenagh Guardian*, 13 August 1988.

⁵⁵ *Nenagh Guardian*, 13 August 1988.

19.91 The Mother Superior, Sister Brigid, was instructed by the department not to use the basement for recreational purposes. This meant that Sean Ross lost the use of its main recreational amenity. Sister Brigid had successfully lobbied to have the cost of a new recreational hall included in the re-development plans. However, when tenders for between £10,820 and £18,500 were received to undertake the planned renovations, the department reconsidered the provision of a recreation hall. A memorandum on the subject shows that the department was reluctant to cut the provision of a recreation hall from the redevelopment plans on 'purely financial' grounds and considered that the lack of such a facility in an institution 'where the rehabilitation of the patients is of prime importance' would be 'a serious matter'.

If the girls in this Home are deprived of reasonable entertainment their sojourn in the place will hardly be likely to do them much good...It would be preferable in their own interests to encourage them to stay for the full two years and to reap the maximum benefit of their stay. I consider that this can only be done by providing reasonably adequate facilities for entertainment and amusement and that this in turn is dependent on the provision of a new assembly hall.

19.92 Notwithstanding these concerns, the department was unwilling to fund the provision of a recreational hall. Acknowledging that building costs had increased since the original redevelopment programme was drawn up, the department agreed to increase its grant to £8,050 and suggested that 'the less essential parts of the work', which is presumed to refer to the recreational hall, should be omitted.

The 1950s

19.93 The renovation work at Sean Ross began in May 1952. In September 1952, the Mother Superior, Sister Barbara, sent an overview of work completed to the Department of Health. It included work undertaken for the provision of a new assembly and recreation hall. A departmental memo acknowledged that the congregation 'had no resources of its own' to meet any overrun on the building costs but concluded that no action was called for. It appears that departmental officials were resigned to the fact that the congregation would seek a supplementary grant. In October 1952 the department authorised a grant of £1,800 from the Hospitals Trust Fund towards the cost of providing a new assembly hall. Sister Barbara was grateful: 'It will mean a lot to our girls to have a nice bright hall during these sad few years of their young lives.'

- 19.94 The renovation work at Sean Ross, which included the fitting of fire escapes and other fire safety measures and the provision of a new assembly hall appears to have been completed during 1953.
- 19.95 Statistics notified by the authorities at Sean Ross to the Department of Health for the year ending 31 March 1951 show that 130 women were admitted to the institution. On that date 148 women (28 expectant women; 120 postnatal) and 133 children were living there. All but nine women were maintained by a local authority. One hundred and twenty eight women were discharged during the year: 108 to parents or friends; 13 to another institution (mainly county homes); five to unnamed Good Shepherd Homes⁵⁶ and two were transferred to unnamed hospitals. Eighty five live births and nine stillbirths were recorded during the year and ten children were admitted after birth. Fourteen infant deaths and one child death were notified. Ninety seven children were discharged during the year: 54 to relatives or friends; 23 were informally adopted; ten were boarded out by local authorities; five were placed at nurse by the mother and three children were transferred to a county home for boarding out. One child was discharged to hospital.
- 19.96 Miss Litster raised a question mark over the accuracy of the figures from all mother and baby homes: 'A lot of these figures require checking. Do not assume their accuracy until I have made a report on them.'
- 19.97 The Department of Health files contain no further commentary on the veracity of statistical returns from Sean Ross or any other mother and baby home. The department frequently sought clarification on minor discrepancies and queries were always resolved amicably. Despite Miss Litster's caution, the Commission has not seen any evidence to suggest that the statistical returns furnished by Sean Ross to the department were wilfully inaccurate. The Commission's analysis of the institutional records compiled in Sean Ross has confirmed that there are no significant discrepancies between those records and the annual statistical returns sent to the Department of Health.
- 19.98 In July 1951 a DLGPH inspector, Miss Reidy, inspected the maternity hospital. The departmental record of the previous inspection was not available but the Sister

⁵⁶ Almost certainly Magdalen Laundries.

in charge said it had been about 1946.⁵⁷ The person in charge was Sister Conrad McCarthy, a registered nurse and state certified midwife.⁵⁸ She was the only midwife employed and was assisted by ‘inmate help’. She had sleeping quarters in the hospital and was called when a woman went into labour. Miss Reidy stated that the hospital was adequately staffed. She noted that the hospital had two four-bed wards and a two-bed labour ward and that there was adequate floor space to accommodate this number of beds. There were two bathrooms and WCs for patients and one WC for the staff and this was adequate. Miss Reidy reported that the hospital had central heating and that she was satisfied with the accommodation provided to patients and with the fire safety equipment and fire escapes available there. She noted that no instance of puerperal pyrexia or sepsis was recorded in the hospital since the previous inspection in 1946 and that one maternal death occurred in the intervening five years. Twenty infant deaths and 31 stillbirths had been recorded in the same period. There were two small isolation rooms in the hospital to treat infants who were ill and infants were generally housed in a separate nursery. The standards which had been set by the Department of Health for nurseries in maternity hospitals stipulated that there should be a minimum of eight feet between cots.⁵⁹ However, Miss Reidy noted that infant cots in Sean Ross were less than one foot apart. Nothing was done about this until February 1953.

- 19.99 In his report for 1951, the Tipperary North county medical officer, Dr O’Regan, noted that many women entered Sean Ross in the late stages of pregnancy, and some while in labour. They did not benefit from the care available from the ‘professional medical and nursing staff’ at the home ‘to bring women and their infants safely through their first confinement’. He noted that in 1951, 118 live births and four stillbirths were recorded in Sean Ross representing 107 vertex presentations, five breech presentations; nine forceps deliveries; one version and one caesarean section. He said that the known neo-natal death rate for 1951 was very high and noted that 50% of women discharged themselves and their infants less than three months after confinement. He recommended that infants should be kept in the institution for at least six months so that they could be fully vaccinated

⁵⁷ There was an inspection by an architect in 1946 – see above. The Commission has not seen any report of a general inspection in that year.

⁵⁸ It seems that Sister Conrad had acquired a midwifery qualification since 1944 when Miss Litster reported that she was not a qualified midwife.

⁵⁹ These were not statutory requirements. The standards were set out in departmental circulars which were revised from time to time.

and immunised against diphtheria. He presented figures for the years 1947-51 which showed that close to 50% of women were admitted less than one month before confinement; over 21% of women left Sean Ross with their child less than one month after confinement and 34% left within three months after giving birth.

- 19.100 In February 1952, Miss Litster again inspected Sean Ross. At the time of her visit 141 women and 120 children were living there. Four infants, aged from twelve days to seven months, were under observation in the infirmary but were not seriously ill. St Michael's Ward housed eight infants under six months old. They were reportedly 'comfortable, healthy and thriving'. St Kevin's Ward housed 15 infants aged three weeks to five months. All but two were breastfed and were reportedly 'healthy and thriving'. One child had returned from Temple St Hospital following treatment for 'a malformation'. St Brigid's Ward housed 30 infants aged six months to one year. All were reportedly 'healthy and contented'. St Philomena's Ward housed 21 children aged 12 months to two years old. One child 'about two years old' was suffering from 'bad strabismus'. St Anne's Ward housed 31 children in the higher age groups. Miss Litster noted that all appeared 'healthy, well-cared for and contented', and were well supplied with play material, including a sand pit. In the maternity wing, there were 31 women residents (20 expectant; 11 postpartum) and 11 infants 'who all appeared healthy'.
- 19.101 There were six children aged between three and five years living in the institution. Arrangements were being made to have three adopted to the USA and two others were due to be boarded out. Miss Litster suggested that one child, whom she described as 'backward and not of average intelligence', should be admitted to a convent industrial school.
- 19.102 Miss Litster reported that, in the period 1 April 1951 to 21 February 1952, 112 babies were born in the institution and eight were admitted after birth. In the same period 14 infant deaths were recorded. Age at death ranged from two and a half hours to nine and a half months and the notified causes of death were asphyxia pallida (foetal asphyxia) (three); prematurity (three); congenital cardiac failure (three); septicaemia/toxaemia (two); pneumonia, marasmus and atelectasis. The three infants whose causes of death were certified as foetal asphyxia, and notified to the department as such, were subsequently deemed stillbirths by the department's chief medical advisor even though the infants had lived for five,

seven and ten minutes respectively. The department considered that this was in line with notifications from other institutions.

19.103 Statistics returned to the Department of Health for the year ending 31 March 1952 show that 121 women, 24 of whom were private patients, were admitted to Sean Ross during the year. In the same period 133 were discharged: 82 to parents or relatives; 33 to take up employment; six were transferred to hospital; five went to unnamed Good Shepherd Homes; three married; one was transferred to a county home and one to a mental hospital. Two expectant women discharged themselves before giving birth. Ninety nine live births and four stillbirths were recorded during the year and a further 11 children were admitted after birth. Fifteen infant deaths were notified. One hundred and eleven children were discharged: 53 to relatives or friends; 40 were informally adopted; six were placed at nurse by their mothers; five were boarded out by local authorities; four were transferred to industrial schools and three children were transferred to hospital.

19.104 In April 1952, the assistant county engineer for Tipperary North surveyed the fire protection measures in place at Sean Ross. He reported that the premises comprised a three-storey building with convent, nursery, bakehouse and laundry and a two-storey hospital. He noted that the convent block had a night population of around 250 and that the hospital block housed around 50. There was an adequate water supply to the institution to supply one fire engine. He recommended that the Mother Superior delegate responsibility for fire precautions to a responsible person and make provision to sound a fire alarm other than using the chapel bell. There were 16 fire extinguishers and two stirrup pumps on the premises and the hospital had a newly built fire escape. He recommended that a second fire escape was required there and that two fire escapes were required at the convent block. He recommended that all 30 doors on the premises should have keys affixed under glass with instructions for their use. In her reply, Sister Barbara, said that Sister Conrad had been put in charge of fire protection in the hospital block and that Sister Mary Bernard had taken responsibility for the convent block. She stated that Sister Mary Bernard worked in a hospital in London during World War II and that her experience 'ought to be helpful'. She stated that one fire escape had been erected and that she could not guarantee that the congregation could provide any others due to their 'present financial condition'. It should be noted that Tipperary North County Council was assessing fire precautions and fire escapes at all maternity homes in North Tipperary at this time.

19.105 In February 1953, a Department of Health medical inspector, Dr Fanning, was asked to report on infant accommodation in the maternity hospital. Dr Fanning reported that there were eight cots in the nursery at the time of his visit and that they were in close proximity to each other. There was not enough ground space to ensure that cots could be placed eight feet apart to comply with the department's own standards. He also inspected nurseries in the home section of Sean Ross and the prescribed distance between cots was not observed there either. Although the nurseries at Sean Ross did not have the floor space to comply with the department's regulations, Dr Fanning noted that all nurseries were well ventilated. He recognised that if the department was to insist on the prescribed distance between cots then the numbers admitted would have to be radically reduced or extra accommodation would have to be provided. He was not prepared to give unqualified approval to conditions which were in conflict with the department's standards but, having regard for 'all the circumstances' and the 'experience of the institutional Medical Officer', he concluded that he would not press for increased accommodation in the home.

Adoptions to USA

19.106 In an undated memo on adoptions from Sean Ross, Miss Litster noted that 'the stream of adoptions to the U.S.A. continues' and that:

The babies so sent are the best of our children in the Home, the prettiest, the healthiest, the most promising. The restrictions on sending children out of the country, to be incorporated it is hoped in an Adopted Children's Bill, will doubtless put a stop to this export of children.

19.107 Miss Litster inspected Sean Ross again in 1953. She noted that 140 children from there had been adopted in the USA over the previous four years. She considered that the material gain for these children was obvious and that adoptions had been arranged for children who could not be provided for in a similar way in Ireland. She gave an example of 'a half-caste little boy' who had been adopted by 'a negro Catholic family' in the USA. Notwithstanding this, she found it disturbing to see so many Irish children sent permanently out of the country. She pointed to the fact that the children sent to the USA were carefully selected and examined for health and intelligence while the older children left in Sean Ross for boarding out were those 'handicapped physically or mentally'. She acknowledged that these adoptions did not infringe the *Adoption Act 1952*. However, she received an undertaking from Sister Barbara that Irish adopters, when available, would be

given priority over US adopters. In a note on her report, the secretary of the department wrote:

The adoptions abroad do not call for any action by the Department of Health. Extended boarding out arrangements was the only way to keep children in Ireland.

- 19.108 Statistics returned to the Department of Health for the year ending 31 March 1953 show that 133 women, 26 of whom were private patients, were admitted to Sean Ross during the year. One maternal death (due to coronary embolism) was notified. One hundred and forty five women were discharged: 52 to parents or relatives with their babies; 47 to parents or relatives without their babies; 35 took up employment; eight married; one was discharged to a Good Shepherd Home, one to a county home and one was transferred to hospital. One hundred and fourteen live births and four stillbirths were notified during the year. Thirteen child deaths were notified. One hundred and twenty two children were discharged: 55 to relatives or friends; 55 were adopted; six were placed at nurse through societies; two were transferred to industrial schools; one was placed at nurse by the mother and one was transferred to a county home for boarding out.
- 19.109 In November 1953, Miss Reidy again inspected the maternity hospital. Sister Barbara Feeney was the Mother Superior and Sister Conrad McCarthy remained in charge of the maternity hospital assisted by 'inmate help'. Miss Reidy found the hospital adequately staffed and furnished; there was adequate sanitary accommodation for patients and staff, proper fire precautions and precautions relating to the storage of medicines were observed. However, she noted that accommodation for infants still did not comply with the department's standards. There were nine cots in the hospital nursery: four cots one foot apart; four cots one and a half feet apart and one cot three feet from the others. In the two years since her previous inspection of the hospital, she reported that twelve infant deaths and two miscarriages were recorded.
- 19.110 In May 1954, a Department of Health memorandum on institutional services available to 'unmarried mothers and illegitimate children' gave an overview of Sean Ross. The memorandum stated that the institution had accommodation for 170 women and 170 children. Average daily bed occupancy in 1953 was stated as 124 mothers and 112 children. The memorandum noted that, in 1953, Sean Ross received £17,927 in local authority capitation payments and an additional £355

from the Maternity and Child Welfare scheme. Total receipts for the year were recorded as £23,785; total expenditure was £24,995 leaving a deficit of £1,210. The capitation rate at Sean Ross had been revised upwards in 1953 to £2 a week for each woman and £1 a week for each child. This rate was intended to cover the cost of all drugs, medicine and medical services provided by the institution. The memorandum confirmed that Dr Hanley remained as visiting medical officer to the institution and that emergency deliveries and caesarean sections were dealt with onsite.

- 19.111 In June 1954, Miss Litster reported that 133 women and 122 children were living in Sean Ross. She noted that, overall, the children appeared healthy, happy and well-cared for. There had been an outbreak of chickenpox and three infants were recovering in the infirmary. The congregation had set up a kindergarten for children aged three years and upwards. It was conducted by a member of the congregation qualified in kindergarten teaching and the area was equipped with a good range of teaching materials. Sixteen children were in the kindergarten group, 13 of whom were about to be adopted. One child was to be adopted in Ireland, one in England and 11 were going to the USA. A new recreation hall had been provided for the mothers. It was equipped with a radio and piano, a bookcase with books and magazines and a raised stage for concerts and plays. Miss Litster described the new semi-basement refectory as somewhat dark but noted that fluorescent lighting and mirrors were being installed to brighten the room. On the day of her visit dinner consisted of soup, meat and two vegetables, and a sweet (semolina and rhubarb). In the evening women were served tea, bread and butter, with sausage, black or white pudding, salad or stewed fruit. Miss Litster noted that new sprung mattresses had been purchased for the maternity hospital beds. In the period 1 April 1953 to 31 March 1954, 145 children were born in, and a further 23 children were admitted to, Sean Ross. Seven infant deaths were recorded in the same period. Six of the seven infant deaths occurred in the first 24 hours of life. Causes of death were given as: premature birth (three); asphyxia pallida (two); infantile hematemesis and neo-natal Infection. One woman, who gave birth to twins, died of eclampsia.
- 19.112 In June 1954 a Cork based priest contacted the government about one of his parishioners who was living with her new-born baby in Sean Ross. He said that the woman's parents 'missed her weekly help very much' but understood that she was obliged to remain in Sean Ross 'to pay for the upkeep of her baby'. The

Department of Health replied that the woman in question was not obliged to remain in Sean Ross to pay for the upkeep of her baby and that Limerick County Council was paying for the maintenance of the woman and her child. She was obliged to remain with her child until adoption, or private nursed out arrangements were made but the department said that the most appropriate action would be that the woman's parents would take their daughter and granddaughter home. Institutional records show that the parents did not take her or her child home. The woman remained in Sean Ross for a further 18 months until her child was adopted to the USA.

- 19.113 In July 1955, Miss Litster again inspected Sean Ross. One hundred and fifty one women and 125 children were living in the institution at the time. Ten of the children were aged over three years. Adoptions had been arranged for all ten children: five in Ireland and five in the USA. Twelve children aged between two and three years were awaiting adoption. Miss Litster noted that boarding out had practically ceased at Sean Ross at this stage. She observed that, while adoptive parents were readily secured for Irish children in the USA, preference should be given, where possible, to suitable Irish adopters. Miss Litster considered that the placing of 'attractive and healthy' children in Irish homes might encourage more Irish couples to consider adoption.
- 19.114 Miss Litster noted that 71 infants were born in Sean Ross during the first seven months of 1955. Twelve infant deaths were notified in the same period. Three infants died in the maternity hospital aged between eight hours and three days. Three children aged over twelve months died of viral pneumonia or complications associated with pneumonia. Five infants aged between ten weeks and eight months were also notified as having died due to viral pneumonia. In the remaining case, mesenteric thrombosis was given as the cause of death.
- 19.115 In 1955, Sister Barbara considered undertaking works to improve and expand facilities at Sean Ross. An engineer's report on the maternity hospital concluded that the costs associated with bringing the existing hospital buildings up to normal hospital standards would outweigh the cost of building a new hospital in a more suitable location. The main concerns raised by the engineer were:
- (a) the health risks posed by the close proximity of the maternity hospital to the farm yard;

- (b) the fact that all three buildings were not linked and could only be accessed through the farm yard;
- (c) ceiling heights and the general accommodation were 'below normal maternity hospital standards';
- (d) the hospital was low lying and inadequate drainage meant that the site was prone to flooding; and
- (e) the general layout of the buildings obscured views of the surrounding landscape and were 'not very pleasant for patients and staff'.

19.116 In November 1955, Dr Hanley wrote to the Department of Health to support Sister Barbara's request for financial assistance to provide more modern maternity facilities. He told the department that ante-natal patients were housed in converted coach houses which were low, damp, poorly lit and ventilated and were in close proximity to a farmyard on one side and an open sewer on the other. He reminded the department of the typhoid outbreak in 1944 and cautioned that there could be another epidemic. The Bishop of Killaloe also wrote in support of the request.

19.117 The Department of Health estimated that construction costs for a new maternity hospital would run to £30,000 and the modernisation of the existing hospital would cost even more. The department conceded that, due to the overall financial position in 1956, both proposals would have to be deferred for consideration for some years. However, the department did send a civil engineering inspector to assess the situation.

19.118 In May 1956, the engineering inspector visited the maternity hospital. The first issue which struck him was that of fire safety. This issue had not been considered as part of the modernisation plans submitted by the congregation or the concerns raised by Dr Hanley. The engineering inspector reported that the maternity hospital was a two-storey building which housed 22 women on the first floor. The first floor was accessed by a narrow timber stair and the floors and roof were also timber; he concluded that the building was 'a major fire risk'. He advised that a veranda should be built at first floor level to act as an alternative escape from the hospital block and that this work should be carried out as a matter of urgency. In addition, he advised that smoke stop fireproof doors should be installed on the first floor.

- 19.119 The engineering inspector noted that there were two dining rooms for patients; one had seating for 40 women adjoining the hospital block and the other had seating for 100 women adjoining the nursery block. The floors of both dining rooms had very rough surfaces and were badly pitted and he recommended that they be concreted and finished with linoleum. He also drew attention to the fact that there was 'constant traffic' between the dormitory, hospital and dining room blocks which were all accessed through an open yard. He noted that this was very unpleasant for both patients and staff, particularly in inclement weather, and recommended that a covered walkway be erected to link these three buildings. He further noted that rain water was discharged into the hospital yard via down pipes which resulted in flooding in some buildings.
- 19.120 An architect and civil engineer investigated the sewerage system. He reported that the sewerage system serving the hospital, nurseries and main house was adequate but he expressed concern about an open drain which carried effluent from a septic tank to an open stream. He noted that liquid manure ran from the cow house along an open sewer parallel to the hospital building to an open stream. He recommended that all sewage should be piped when discharged and that the existing septic tanks and sewerage systems should be cleaned and overhauled. He told Sister Barbara that the works outlined in his report would cost in the region of £4,000. The Department of Health had previously informed the congregation that, although it did not have the means to fund any major restorative works, it would contribute to the cost of undertaking the minor, but necessary, remedial works. The department now decided that it would give a grant of £1,300 to cover the cost of installing fire escapes, upgrading the sewerage system, connecting downpipes and renovating the dining rooms.
- 19.121 In August 1956 the Minister for Health wrote to Bishop Rodgers of Killaloe asking his advice on the institutional treatment of unmarried mothers in Sean Ross. The minister told the bishop that all government departments were trying to reduce expenditure and he was concerned about the length of stay of mothers in Sean Ross. The minister said this was usually two years and the average cost of maintenance for a woman and her child was £230 and £100 respectively. The minister said that social workers attached to catholic societies in Britain reported that one of the main reasons why single expectant Irish women left for Britain was that the two year stay in a mother and baby home in Ireland was out of line with the practice of catholic homes in Britain. The department was considering reducing

the period of stay in mother and baby homes to six months after the birth of the baby and asked for the bishop's views on the matter. The minister also said that earlier discharge would free up accommodation for women on second or later pregnancies who were living in county homes.

19.122 In his reply, Bishop Rodgers said that he sympathised with the minister's efforts to achieve economy in health spending but urged him to approach the issue of unmarried mothers 'carefully and cautiously'. The bishop agreed that some women could safely leave after six months but warned that others required 'a longer period for rehabilitation'. He identified such women as those who were 'sub-normal' and those who were 'ignorant of basic religion and moral principals'. He stated that although such women required longer periods for rehabilitation, he agreed that a stay of two years in a mother and baby home was unnecessary. The bishop was also receptive to the idea that 'repetitive cases' should be accommodated outside the county home system and expressed his wish that the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary would look favourably on the minister's proposals.

19.123 In March 1957, the minister wrote to Sister Antonia, Superior General of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, to discuss the congregation's role in the provision of institutional care for unmarried mothers in Ireland. The minister told Sister Antonia that the congregation played a vital role in providing such services and sought her co-operation in further developing them. The minister said that the prospect of a two-year stay deterred single expectant women from entering mother and baby homes in Ireland and that many opted to leave for the UK as an alternative. He cautioned that the falling demand for admissions to mother and baby homes in Ireland would have serious financial implications for the congregation. He further asserted that the financial position of the congregation's homes in Ireland would become 'very difficult' and their discontinuance might have to be considered.

19.124 The minister also raised the practice of maintaining single women with two or more children in county homes. He pointed out that Dunboyne catered for women with more than one child but conceded that efforts to establish homes elsewhere, with the object of removing such women from county homes, had failed.

- 19.125 The minister proposed that, as a general rule, women should be discharged from mother and baby homes much sooner after the birth of their babies and that the congregation should retain children, unaccompanied, until their adoption or boarding out was arranged. He qualified this proposal by stating that women who required a two year stay for 'rehabilitation and re-adjustment' would not be afforded an early discharge. He further suggested that two of the congregation's homes could be reserved for single women on their first pregnancy and the third would be reserved for women on their second or subsequent pregnancy exclusively. He stated that, if Sister Antonia was amenable to his proposals, Sean Ross would be the most suitable home to cater for single women on their second or subsequent pregnancy.
- 19.126 The Commission has not seen any record of a reply from Sister Antonia. The minister took the opportunity to discuss the matter with Sister Rosemonde when she visited the department in April 1957. Sister Rosemonde, who had moved from Sean Ross to Castlepollard, told the Minister that she and the Mother Superiors of Sean Ross and Bessborough preferred that 'second cases' (women on their second or subsequent pregnancy) would be taken into all three homes rather than the proposal that a separate home would be set aside for them. Miss Litster, who also attended the meeting, told the minister that the Sacred Heart Homes were already accepting 'second cases'. Miss Litster further stated that the congregation took care to ensure that a woman who had been in a particular Sacred Heart home on her first pregnancy would not be admitted to the same home on her second. Miss Litster also stated that the congregation would not in any circumstances admit a pregnant woman accompanied by her first child.
- 19.127 In March 1958, the Department of Health sent a letter to all city and county managers to tell them that the authorities at all three Sacred Heart homes had agreed that 'in suitable cases' the early discharge of women was now possible. The department also said that the Sacred Heart homes were also prepared to accept 'some mothers' in their second or subsequent pregnancies but that the congregation would not admit mothers accompanied by children.
- 19.128 In 1958, the Department of Health reviewed the cost of accommodating women and children in the Sacred Heart homes over the period 1950 to 1957. The review concluded that, although the number of admissions to the homes had decreased, the operating costs had increased substantially. The department's analysis

showed that admissions had decreased from 373 women and 350 babies in 1950 to 299 women and 257 babies in 1957. Expenditure had increased from £55,560 in 1950 to £83,160 in 1956 but decreased to £78,370 in 1957; the average cost had increased from £77 for each person in 1950 to £141 in 1957. The review recognised that the total costs had to come from public funds as the institutions had virtually no other income. The Minister for Health concluded:

The only effective economy in this matter would be to reduce the number of special homes from three to two, as it is now clear that two is sufficient to serve the full needs. I assume, however, that such a step would have to be approached rather slowly and would have to be preceded by some trial of every possible alternative.

- 19.129 In April 1958, Miss Reidy again carried out an inspection. She reported that there were seven dormitories for women: two twelve-bed units; two fourteen-bed units; one eleven-bed unit; one eight-bed unit and one ten-bed unit attached to the nurseries. The total bed complement for women was 81 beds. There were 72 women resident at the time. The women's dormitories were converted stables which were 'clean, comfortable and centrally heated'. The infant accommodation had four units: three thirty-cot units and one twenty four-cot unit, which were described as 'large, bright and airy'. There were 114 cots for infants but there were 118 infants living there; eight of the children were awaiting transport to adoptive homes in the USA.
- 19.130 Miss Reidy also inspected the maternity hospital. Again, she recorded that the hospital was well-staffed, clean and well-kept and accommodation and sanitary accommodation for patients and staff was adequate. She noted a slight improvement in nursery accommodation where infant cots were two to two and a half feet apart; the recommended distance was eight feet. One maternal and ten infant deaths were recorded in the three years since her last inspection of the hospital.
- 19.131 Miss Reidy asked for data about the discharge of children. The congregation said that, in the period 1 August 1955 to 31 March 1956, 67 children were born in or admitted to Sean Ross. In the same period 19 were discharged with their mothers; six were adopted in the USA; four were adopted in Ireland; 20 were discharged to St Patrick's Guild (presumably to be placed for adoption); two children were boarded out and three had died. In the period April 1956 to 31 March 1957, 109

children were born in, or admitted to, the home; 36 of these were discharged with their mothers; ten were adopted in the USA; seven were adopted in Ireland; 19 were discharged to other adoption societies and 13 children had died. In the period 1 April 1957 to 31 March 1958, 128 children were born in, or admitted to, the home. Of these, 41 were discharged with their mothers; 12 were adopted in Ireland; 26 were discharged to other adoption societies; one to a relative; one to the Catholic Women's Aid Society; two to Dublin hospitals; one to a Mercy Convent (probably an industrial school) and ten children had died. In the period 1 August 1955 to 31 March 1958, 306 children were born in or admitted to Sean Ross. Fifteen were children of private fee-paying patients.

- 19.132 Miss Reidy expressed alarm that the infant death rate at Sean Ross had increased since 1954 and had remained high during 1958. Furthermore, it appeared that seven in every ten deaths during this period were due to viral pneumonia. When questioned, the congregation told her that the affected children had been given every medical care available but stated that the facilities available were 'inadequate to provide proper care for critically ill infants'. The Reverend Mother also drew attention to the high levels of morbidity which prevailed among infants who survived viral pneumonia and the difficulty in finding foster homes for them. Miss Reidy concluded that the continued high infant death rate warranted medical investigation and advised the Department of Health to refer the matter to its chief medical advisor to identify measures which would reduce infant deaths.
- 19.133 It is unclear whether the Department of Health made any intervention at Sean Ross. However, Miss Reidy's report for the year ending May 1959 showed a marked reduction in infant deaths. Three infant deaths had occurred. Two were neo-natal and the third occurred in a nineteen-day old infant who contracted influenza from his mother. In Miss Reidy's subsequent report covering the period 1 May 1959 to August 1960, infant mortality had fallen even further. Of 169 children born in or admitted to the institution during this period two infant deaths occurred.
- 19.134 In a short report on an inspection visit in May 1959, Miss Reidy said that the general administration of the institution was satisfactory, the hospital was clean and well-kept and that mothers and infants were well-cared for. The accommodation for women was at 92% occupancy; infant accommodation was at 78% occupancy; and the maternity hospital had over 90% occupancy. Seven of the 41 women living in the maternity hospital were mothers of infants housed in the

hospital nursery. These women lived in the hospital block and worked there as female attendants. There were 13 unaccompanied children living in the home. Three had been admitted unaccompanied for adoption; their names did not appear on the books and they were not maintained by a health authority. A further seven children were also unaccompanied. Three of these were described as 'delicate' and considered 'not fit for adoption' due to impaired health. One child was 'mixed race' and the congregation reportedly 'found it difficult' to place the child in an adoptive home. The mother of one child was in a 'mental hospital' and the child was waiting to be boarded out. Another was recovering from orthopaedic surgery and the remaining child was due for discharge to the USA. Three children aged under two were also in the home unaccompanied. The mothers of two of these children were under treatment in external hospitals and the third child was admitted at the request of a health authority because of his mother's 'extreme youth'.

1960s

- 19.135 In an inspection report in August 1960, Miss Reidy said that the hospital was clean and well-kept and the records were up to date. She reported that a new nursery with central heating and cross-ventilation had been built along with a new feeding room equipped with wash-up sinks and basins. Miss Reidy noted that 39 of the 45 maternity beds were occupied. She noted that 135 deliveries were recorded since her last inspection (six stillbirths); one miscarriage and three neo-natal infant deaths were notified.
- 19.136 In April 1961, the children's officer of Wexford County Council wrote to the Department of Health about a 25-year-old woman and her infant who were maintained by the Wexford Board of Assistance in Sean Ross. He described the woman in question as a 'hopeless mental defective' who was 'entirely incapable' of looking after herself and her child and required assistance with washing and dressing. He said that the Mother Superior at Sean Ross was anxious to discharge the woman and that the woman's mother wanted to have her back in the family home. However, no member of the woman's family was willing to accept responsibility for her child. The child could not be placed for adoption until he had been assessed. He suggested that the child be placed in an industrial school so that the mother could leave Sean Ross. The department did not think this appropriate in view of the child's age and suggested that the child remain in the care of Sean Ross for 12 months so that his mental intelligence could be assessed

later. Institutional records show that the child remained in Sean Ross for a further 22 months until he was transferred to St Clare's, Stamullen in July 1963.

- 19.137 Sometimes politicians made representations about having women discharged from Sean Ross even though no arrangements had been made for the child. Usually, the family wanted the mother to come home but would not take responsibility for the child. In one such case in the early 1960s, the woman's mother was prepared to take the child but the woman's brother would not allow the child into the family home. As a result, the mother had to stay in Sean Ross for almost three years. Her child was adopted to the USA. At this stage, her mother did not want her home.
- 19.138 A TD wrote to the Department of Health in the early 1960s looking for 'early adoption' for a child born in Sean Ross. The department made enquiries with the Mother Superior who said that, although 'all the advantages of adoption' were put to her, the woman was anxious to keep her baby and would not part with it 'for any offer'. She said that the congregation in Sean Ross would not dissuade her. The woman herself wrote to the department stating 'I have no intention whatever of parting with my baby'. The department subsequently told the TD that the woman's aunt had returned from England to claim her and her child. However, institutional records show that she had remained in Sean Ross for a further 11 months, until her child was discharged for adoption.
- 19.139 In January 1962, Miss Reidy again reported that the maternity hospital was clean and well-kept and that all records were up to date and available for inspection. In the two years since her last inspection of the hospital, 175 deliveries (three stillbirths) were recorded. No maternal deaths had occurred and two neo-natal deaths (asphyxia pallida and prematurity) were notified. She noted that 38 of the 45 maternity beds were occupied.
- 19.140 In July 1962, Miss Reidy again inspected the home. The nurseries and women's dormitories were very clean and well-kept; all records were 'available and properly posted' and the wellbeing of both women and children was very satisfactory. There were 106 children living there; 64 were aged under one year. In the period 15 August 1960 to 20 July 1962, 302 children were born in, or admitted to, Sean Ross. Of these, 68 were subsequently discharged with their mothers; 116 were adopted (USA 45; Ireland 65; England five; Scotland one); 68 were discharged to

other adoption societies; 13 to relatives; two to hospital (Cherry Orchard and Temple Street); seven to what was described as 'schools' (some went to an industrial school, the others went to orphanages); five to 'special institutions'; six to St Clare's, Stamullen, and two to St Patrick's Home, Navan Road (Pelletstown). A further 16 children were boarded out. Seven infant deaths were recorded during this period. Causes of death were given as pneumonia (three), bronchitis (two), hyperpyrexia and acute gastroenteritis.

- 19.141 In April 1963, Miss Reidy again inspected the maternity hospital. She reported that the hospital was clean and well-kept and that records were up to date and available for viewing. She noted that 174 deliveries (five stillbirths) had been recorded in the 14 months since her previous visit and that one neo-natal death had been notified. At the request of the General Registration Office (GRO), Miss Reidy made enquiries regarding the registration of births at Sean Ross. She was told by the Mother Superior that all infants in the hospital were registered and that registration took place weekly. Miss Reidy stated that the Mother Superior insisted that all children admitted to the home, whose births were not registered, were subsequently registered at the place of their birth and that a copy of the birth certificate was sent to her. While the Department of Health memorandum did not record the problem relating to the registration of births the department asked Miss Reidy to query registration practices at Bessborough, Castlepollard and St Patrick's, Navan Road (Pelletstown).
- 19.142 Miss Reidy's report in July 1963, again reported that the welfare of both women and children was 'quite satisfactory'. At the time of inspection 113 women and 77 children were living there. In the period 20 July 1962 to 31 July 1963, 46 children were discharged with their mothers; 66 were adopted (Ireland, 37; USA, 27; England, one; Scotland, one); 43 were sent to other adoption societies; eight were boarded out; six were discharged to relatives; four to hospitals; and seven were transferred to 'special schools'. Two infant deaths were notified during this period. Causes of death were given as measles and pneumonia.
- 19.143 In May 1964, the Department of Health studied the audited accounts of the three Sacred Heart homes and queried why the running costs associated with Sean Ross had increased in 1963. Auditors for the congregation told the department that there were no members of the congregation on the nursing staff of Sean Ross

and that increased expenditure there related to the provision of new bathrooms at a cost of £2,800 and renovations to the chapel at a cost of £500.

- 19.144 In response to statements made during debates surrounding the *Adoption Bill 1963*, the Department of Health drew up an overview of how single expectant women were catered for in the 'Special Homes' and the pathways available to women who were not in a position to support themselves and their child. The department pointed to Section 54 of the *Health Act 1953*, as the legal basis for maintaining women in Sean Ross, Bessborough and Castlepollard. This stated that persons unable to provide shelter and maintenance for themselves were eligible for institutional assistance in a county home or similar institution. Furthermore, the department pointed to their obligations under the *Institutional Assistance Regulations 1954*, to provide maternity services to women living in mother and baby homes. The department acknowledged that the legislation did not empower those running and/or operating mother and baby homes to detain a woman against her will. However, it was equally acknowledged that a woman could not leave a mother and baby home without taking her child with her or without planning for the future care of the child. The department set out the principal exit pathways for children on their discharge from a mother and baby home.
- 19.145 The first and, according to the department, most appropriate pathway was that a child would leave a mother and baby home in the care of the birth mother or her family. Where this was not an option the department considered that the next most appropriate exit pathways were legal adoption, boarding out by a health authority, placement in a foster home by a voluntary agency and as a last resort, placement in a long-stay institution such as an industrial school. The department acknowledged that the latter four options required the formal consent of the mother and often 'exerted emotional stress on women who had to make a decision regarding the future care of their children'. This being so, and in the interests of infant welfare, the department considered it desirable that women should remain with their children in mother and baby homes until arrangements for their future had been agreed. The department recognised that this was the primary factor which determined the duration of a woman's post-natal stay in an institutional setting. The department also acknowledged that no complaint had ever been received regarding the duration of a woman's pre-natal stay in a mother and baby

home and concluded that most women 'were willing enough to withdraw from the social scene when their condition becomes obvious'.

- 19.146 In April 1964, Miss Reidy inspected the maternity hospital. She again reported that the hospital was clean and well-kept and that records were up to date and available for inspection. In the twelve months since her previous inspection, 146 deliveries (six stillbirths) were recorded and six neo-natal infant deaths were notified. Regarding the stillbirths, the causes recorded were breech and cord prolapse; multiple birth (macerated); face presentation and cord tightly around neck; multiple birth and congenital abnormality; pre-viable prematurity, mother aged 14 years and pre-eclampsia toxæmia (macerated). Causes of neo-natal infant deaths were given as: congenital abnormality (three); hydrops foetalis; atelectasis and prematurity/asphyxia pallida.
- 19.147 In her October 1964 inspection, Miss Reidy noted that the well-being of mothers and children was 'satisfactory'. At the time of her visit, 71 women and 84 children were living there. There were eight children aged two years and over in the home but their adoption had been arranged. In the period since her last inspection, 198 children were born in Sean Ross and a further 21 babies born outside the institution were admitted. Two infant deaths were notified during this period. Of the 193 children discharged from the home 150 were put up for adoption (Ireland, 62; USA, 41; UK, one;) and 46 were sent to other adoption societies.
- 19.148 Miss Reidy's July 1965 report showed a similar pattern. In the fourteen months since her previous inspection, 203 births and six stillbirths were recorded. One maternal and five neo-natal deaths were notified in the same period. She noted that four cases of abortion (miscarriage) were treated and that three multiple pregnancies had occurred also. She stated that although the babies associated with the multiple pregnancies involved 'a considerable degree of immaturity' all six infants thrived. The causes of infant deaths were given as: hyper pyrexia; pre-viable prematurity; intra-cranial haemorrhage and asphyxia neonatorum. She reported that 50% of women admitted in this period were aged 21 years and younger; 16 were under the age of 17. The mother who died was a 21-year-old woman with a history of mental depression who suffered frequent attacks of tachycardia and died of coronary thrombosis.

19.149 In May 1966, Fr Colleran of the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society (CPRS) complained to the Department of Health about the behaviour of Louth County Council in relation to a 17-year-old single expectant woman whom the society had repatriated from England and placed in Sean Ross. Fr Colleran outlined how the society made the usual confidential application to the county council. However, an official of the council had called to the woman's family home, informed her mother that she was expecting an 'illegitimate' baby in Sean Ross and asked if she would contribute towards her maintenance. The woman's mother was reportedly deeply disturbed to hear about her daughter and her husband travelled to Sean Ross to investigate the matter. The woman was deeply upset to encounter her father at Sean Ross. However, he does not seem to have asked for her discharge. He told his wife that the woman in Sean Ross was not their daughter but a woman with the same name from the Dundalk area. As similar cases had come to light Fr Colleran said:

All through the years we have always understood that this confidential information which we disclose to the Officers of the County Councils would in fact be treated as such. May I add that I have rarely had occasion to be concerned that our trust was misplaced. You will appreciate that the whole system and method of helping unmarried mothers in this country must break down completely unless we can guarantee to these mothers that their parents, relatives and neighbours will not be informed of their condition. Secrecy is absolutely vital in the majority of these cases.

19.150 In January 1965, Dr Hourihane of the Department of Health medical inspectorate visited Sean Ross. He reported that the hospital labour and delivery wards had 44 beds combined and that Dr Hanley, medical officer to the district hospital, Roscrea, remained as attending obstetrician and medical officer at Sean Ross. In the year ended 31 December 1964, 160 births and six infant deaths were notified. He said that the infant deaths were mainly due to prematurity and congenital abnormalities. At the time of inspection 94 women and 77 children were living in the institution. Dr Hourihane noted that other buildings on the estate included a convent, chapel, laundry, bake house and farm outbuildings and stated that the institution was 'almost self-sufficient'. Reporting to the chief medical advisor to the department, he said that he was 'impressed by the general atmosphere in the Home', that the mothers 'appeared to be content and well-dressed' and that the relationship between the mothers and the staff 'was good'. He reported that all infants were

'healthy, well-nourished in appearance', were 'obviously well-cared for' and that the overall cleanliness of the home was 'first-class'.

- 19.151 He also reported that proposals made by the North Tipperary county council to reconstitute Sean Ross as a home for mentally handicapped children had caused great anxiety among the Sisters in Sean Ross and that they were determined to fight the proposal (see below). The Mother Superior, Sister Barbara, told him that she was reluctant to spend money on maintenance due to the uncertainty of the situation.
- 19.152 Miss Reidy inspected the maternity hospital in March 1968 and reported that there were eleven pre-natal and four post-natal women in the hospital along with four neo-natal infants. In the three years since her last inspection, 518 women had been admitted and 408 births and ten stillbirths had been recorded. She noted that 110 women admitted to Sean Ross in this period were not subsequently confined there: 65 were admitted with babies born elsewhere; twelve were transferred to other hospitals; nine married and twenty four expectant women discharged themselves prior to giving birth. No maternal deaths were recorded in this period and the hospital treated three abortion (miscarriage) cases. Eleven infant deaths were notified. The causes of infant deaths were given as: atelectasis and asphyxia pallida (three); respiratory failure (three); intra-cranial haemorrhage; C.H.D.; prematurity (multiple birth) and congenital abnormality. Miss Reidy reported that the hospital conformed to the required standard.

Closure of Sean Ross

- 19.153 In 1964 the Department of Health began to examine the occupancy levels in the Sacred Heart mother and baby homes. The department noted that the combined available accommodation in the homes during 1963 was 880 beds and that total occupancy for the year was 485. The department considered that 'sizeable economies could be achieved' by closing one.
- 19.154 The Tipperary Association for Mentally Handicapped Children was trying to establish a centre for the institutional care of children with intellectual disabilities in the county. The association had raised £6,000 and was lobbying for the conversion of the former fever hospital in Roscrea (which had been closed) into a home for the mentally handicapped. The Commission of Inquiry on Mental

Handicap was sitting at the time and the shortage of residential care centres for people with intellectual disabilities was one of the issues it was addressing.

- 19.155 In September 1964, the department asked the Superior General of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Sister Bernadette, if she would consider reconstituting one of their institutions in Ireland as a home for 'mentally retarded girls'. The department said that such a move would represent 'a worth-while contribution towards the mentally retarded in this country' and would help to resolve the financial difficulties experienced by the congregation in Ireland due to the falling numbers of admissions.
- 19.156 In September 1964, Sister Bernadette, with Sister Rosemonde (Castlepollard) and Sister Barbara (Sean Ross) met the Department of Health to discuss the matter. The department explained that, while low percentage occupancy and the consequent higher maintenance costs were a cause for concern, the more important consideration was the need to make the best use of all accommodation in the national health service. There was a pressing need for additional accommodation for 'mentally handicapped' children and the severely handicapped were the most pressing problem. All the institutions catering for the moderate and severely handicapped were full. The department considered Sean Ross to be the most suitable of the three Sacred Heart homes for the care of mentally handicapped people. Bessborough was considered but the Cork Polio and General Aftercare Association was already providing a similar service in the Cork area.
- 19.157 Sister Barbara said that the congregation was aware for some time that the three homes were not operating to full capacity and was anxious to remedy the matter. She proposed that one of the homes be used to cater for babies and children only. She understood that, in recent years, more women were going to England to have their babies and many of these babies were 'lost to non-Catholic organisations'. The congregation hoped to encourage more unmarried mothers to have their babies in the special homes in Ireland by letting it be known that women could leave Sean Ross before their babies were adopted. The department took the view that two homes would still be sufficient even if this scheme was introduced. If the congregation agreed in principle that one home could be used for mentally handicapped people, the department would inspect the three homes and then make plans. Sister Bernadette said the issue would have to be discussed by the

congregation's council. In October 1964, Sister Bernadette told the department that the council had unanimously agreed in principle and invited the department to undertake its inspections. The congregational council minutes show that, although the 'Sisters in Éire' were not happy with the proposed changes, the congregation was agreeable to the proposal in principle.

- 19.158 In November 1964, departmental inspectors visited the three homes and strongly recommended that Sean Ross was the most suitable for use as a home for mentally handicapped children and possibly some adults.
- 19.159 A meeting was arranged for February 1965 between the congregation and the Department of Health to discuss the matter. The day before the meeting, Sister Bernadette wrote to the department. She said that she had asked the superiors of the three homes to look at the issue through local spectacles. In the period since they had met the department (in September 1964) the numbers in the three homes had increased 'enormously' and the homes were at full capacity. She argued that the figures which the department was using about the number of beds in each home were incorrect; one third were extra beds which had been put in because of demand in earlier years. In effect, the 'past figures meant overcrowding'.
- 19.160 Sister Bernadette's letter also pointed out that the original policy of the congregation was to accept first time mothers only. They were now admitting mothers with second or subsequent pregnancies. She said that it was detrimental for very young first-time mothers aged 15, 16 or 17 (they had one 12 year old) to be with women in their late 30s or early 40s 'who may have had 6 or 7 illegitimate children'. She said that the congregation had considered re-organising so that one of their homes could be put aside to cater for younger women only to assist in their social rehabilitation and that Sean Ross had been the 'unanimous choice' for such a home.
- 19.161 Sister Bernadette said that Sean Ross was the least suitable of the three homes for housing people with mental handicap basically because it was too remote.
- 19.162 At the meeting, Sister Bernadette was accompanied by her assistant and by Sister Barbara, Sean Ross, and Sister Rosemonde, Castlepollard. The letter was read and the Department of Health officials were clearly somewhat surprised by it. A discussion on the numbers ensued. The congregation set out what they regarded

as a reasonable bed complement which would allow for lockers and wardrobes; in the case of Sean Ross, this was 126 mothers and 90 children; there were 110 mothers in residence at the time. The department pointed out that the figures produced by the congregation still meant that two institutions would be sufficient. However, Sister Bernadette's assistant said that the congregation could not turn over one of their homes in Ireland for any other purpose at this time.

19.163 The departmental secretary said that, while reasonably good conditions should obtain in residential homes for unmarried mothers, 'super-standards are not important in the case of able-bodied people only in the Home for a short period'. He also made it clear that the provision of accommodation 'for the mentally handicapped' was the department's primary concern. It was agreed that the congregation and the department would meet again in March. This planned meeting did not take place as it appears that the Bishop of Killaloe arrived at Sean Ross and was then told of the proposal. He had baptismal statistics which showed the increase in the number of children in Sean Ross.

19.164 In April 1965, the Minister for Health wrote a long letter to the bishop outlining the sequence of events. He said that the congregation had argued that if the homes were at full capacity they would be overcrowded and that accommodation, once regarded as appropriate, would not be acceptable to women entering the homes in 1965. He said that, at the meeting with the department, one of the Irish homes superiors had said that women admitted to the Sacred Heart homes in 1965 arrived with 'their transistor sets and large kits of beautifying aids'. The minister accepted that women were entitled to a reasonable standard of accommodation but pointed out that, while the average stay had previously been around two years, the average in 1965 was around three months.⁶⁰ In this letter the minister said that his officials had formed the view that, at the February meeting, the Superior General was agreeable in principle to the release of one of the homes but she was 'considerably embarrassed by the change of front' on the part of the representatives present from two of the Irish houses.

19.165 While the Department of Health and the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts were discussing the future of Sean Ross, neither party had consulted Bishop Rodgers of Killaloe. The bishop admonished the Superior General of the congregation and

⁶⁰ Killaloe Diocesan Archive

the Minister for Health for excluding him from these discussions. In April 1965, after the minister's letter, the bishop said that he had no wish to be presented with 'even a partial *fait accompli* where important religious moral or social issues are involved'. 'Any change to Sean Ross must not be lightly undertaken.'

19.166 The minister replied that:

I cannot sufficiently express my regret that you were not consulted in the first instance when the proposal to convert Sean Ross into a home for mentally-handicapped children emerged and before any other action had been taken. I can only plead that the extreme pressure which I have been bringing to bear on my Department here to find, and even to improvise accommodation, to meet the urgent demands of the parents and relatives of these poor children and equally pitiable adults was responsible for the oversight.

19.167 In May 1965, the bishop wrote to the department. He denied that he was 'piqued' because he had not been consulted about the proposal but said that he was deeply perturbed by

- the fact that a religious community in his diocese had been asked by a government department to give up the work for which they had been admitted into the diocese and
- the records of Sean Ross showed that the need to provide for unmarried mothers, their rehabilitation and the adoption of their children was more pressing and urgent than ever.

19.168 He outlined some statistics in support of his view. He went on to remark that he did not agree that three months was sufficient time for the moral rehabilitation of some women. The department offered to meet the bishop to further discuss the matter even though it was reasonably clear that the bishop did not support the change of use of Sean Ross. The bishop accepted the offer of a meeting but made it clear that he was not interested in the other two homes; Sean Ross was his only concern. A meeting was held in July 1965. The department's conclusion was that, as far as the bishop was concerned, the department could close any home but not Sean Ross. The department concluded that it could forget about Sean Ross as a possible immediate solution to the problem of accommodation for the mentally handicapped.

19.169 The congregational council minutes of November 1966 show that the congregation agreed to the proposal that Sean Ross would be reconstituted as a home for children with mental disabilities. It would appear that this decision was not conveyed to the Department of Health at this time. When the authorities at Sean Ross applied for increased maintenance rates in May 1967 the department raised the issue again. Occupancy rates were falling and, as a result, the Sacred Heart homes had accumulated deficits. In June 1968 the department noted that agreement on the change of use of Sean Ross had been received all round and that discussions regarding the alteration of the institution were in progress. In October 1969 the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary ceased to admit single expectant women to Sean Ross. The last mother and baby were discharged before Christmas 1969 and the institution ceased its operations as a mother and baby home.⁶¹ In August 1970, it opened as St Anne's Hospital for Mentally Handicapped Children.⁶²

Australian Former Child Migrant Project

19.170 In 2001, the project manager of the Australian Former Child Migrant Project (UK) wrote to Sister Sarto in Bessborough to inform her that she had located records relating to ten children who were born in Sean Ross and subsequently sent from the UK to Australia under Barnardo's Child Migrant Scheme. Sister Sarto confirmed that all ten children in question were born in Sean Ross on dates between 1936 and 1946 and that they had been discharged with their mothers who took up employment in Wales. She stated that the women involved had accepted offers of employment at the newly built St Winefride's private hospital operated by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts in Cardiff. Sister Sarto said that a retired member of the congregation who knew the women involved had stated that, while the women worked in St Winefride's, their children lived in 'an orphanage in Swansea'. The project manager confirmed that the children lived in Nazareth Homes in Swansea and Cardiff. With parental permission, all ten children were subsequently sent to Australia from these institutions under the Barnardo's Child Migrant Scheme which ran from 1920-65.⁶³ The project manager said that she was surprised to find children from Ireland among the records of those sent to Australia but acknowledged that Irish children who had been transferred to institutions in Belfast and Derry had also been identified as child migrants.

⁶¹ Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, *Roscrea Annals 1969-89*.

⁶² *Nenagh Guardian*, 14 February 1970.

⁶³ <https://www.childmigrantstrust.com/our-work/child-migration-history>

Institutional records analysed by the Commission show that at least 94 children were transferred from institutions under the Commission's remit to a Nazareth Home in the United Kingdom. In addition, hundreds of women were discharged with their children to take up employment in institutions run by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts in the United Kingdom. It seems plausible to suggest that more children who were born in, or once resident in, one of the institutions under the Commission's remit were also transferred to Australia from orphanages in the United Kingdom.

Evidence of former Sean Ross residents

The experiences described by the former residents who gave evidence to the Commission are largely set out in their own words. In some cases, particular information which might identify the witnesses has not been included.

Resident A, Mother, mid 1950s

19.171 Resident A told the Commission that she became pregnant at the age of 15. When her mother found out she was taken to see a doctor. Her mother thought that her pregnancy was 'a scandal' and she tried to keep it from Resident A's 12 siblings. The witness said:

From then on it was all hullabaloo. It was like, who did it? Who didn't do it? How did it happen? You know, and my father and my mother. Anyhow, I couldn't tell because I didn't actually know any facts of life to be fair, but I knew somebody messed about, you know. When I was out with my sister, he sort of pulled - well, there was two lads and they pulled me into the bushes and whatever happened, it happened, and I didn't even know that that is where babies come from or anything. So, I didn't know. It was like rape I suppose you would call it, you know, they just attacked me... I said two names I thought might be it, and they must have known... it was the day my sister got married this happened.

19.172 She was driven to Sean Ross accompanied by her mother.

They took me as far as Roscrea, but I didn't know anything until I got out and I saw the big house, and I thought it was a convent, yes, that I was going to, I think it is a convent, I don't know, but I was brought in there and from then on I was a different, different clothes, different everything, and you know

whatever you get on and do your work. You know, I wasn't a child anymore. No education of course, they didn't do it then. So, yes, but you know you got a new name. So, you were never to use your name again while you are there anyhow, and everyone else I assume had a wrong name, but it didn't matter. You were put in a dormitory with - there was quite a lot of people in it.

19.173 She worked in the laundry during her time in Sean Ross. She remembered washing sanitary towels by hand.

Up early for you to go to church every morning, back down to where you got your breakfast, and two slices of bread or toast...Then we were assigned jobs. Mine was in the laundry and it wasn't a very nice job, you know. It was like ... how do I call them, a lady's ... The ladies sanitary [towels], let us say, cloth things, and collect them, put them in baskets. They were put into some baskets, wicker baskets. Bring them into the wash house, wash them out by hand, and when it was fine, the day was fine I had to put them out on stones in this yard, yes. Maybe turn them every now and again, and in the meantime, I helped with the sheets and put them through the mangles, big sheets.

19.174 She was taken out of Sean Ross by her father and one of the nuns on one occasion and questioned about the alleged rape while accompanied by her father. She did not know if the person she spoke to was a doctor or a solicitor. She said that they were trying to find out which boy was responsible. She does not know the outcome of that.

19.175 She said that the food in Sean Ross was sparse and that she was constantly hungry.

You were so hungry, I do remember that bit, you got so hungry and you just had whatever the ration was. You couldn't get anything extra. The bread was in the morning. There might have been something in the lunchtime, like I don't know was it soup or something but very little. I found oh God I was always starving, but you get used to it, nobody else had it. So, you didn't. There were no extras or anything.

19.176 She was not told what to expect during labour and her experience in Sean Ross was 'awful'.

They actually tied me, because I was in pain, I thought I am going to die. They tied me down with some, I don't know, stuff to the bed. It was like the bed was on the floor because it was in case I fell out I suppose, I don't know, and it was absolutely horrific, but anyhow once it is over and I was told I suppose, this will teach you, offer it up for the sins you committed and all that. You felt that too, that that is why you got more pain maybe than maybe another one, you know. There were no painkillers in those days I don't think, I don't know whether there was.

19.177 She said that she had to return to work in the home a few days after giving birth. She took up her duties in the steam room and breastfed her baby three times a day. She said that the women were excited to spend time with their babies at feeding times and in the evenings and were resigned to the fact that they could not spend as much time with their babies as they wanted to. She thought that she would be in Sean Ross for her whole life.

19.178 She said that no one ever discussed her baby's adoption with her. She remembered that her mother and married sister visited Sean Ross after her baby was born and she suspects that they made arrangements for her baby's adoption with the nuns. She said that it was not up to her to decide on what happened to her baby and that she did not sign adoption papers. She said that the nuns would not have been able to put her baby up for adoption without her parents' consent. She got up one morning and was told to put her own clothes on. She remembered that her baby was dressed in a blue suit and that there was a car waiting outside.

He was four months old. I was still breastfeeding him. So I fed him and he got all dressed up and everything and told me ... they took the baby, one of the ...a nun, took the baby, and there was a driver in the car and I was told to come out. I actually thought we were going somewhere nice, back home or something, and took us to Dublin.

19.179 She followed her mother and one of the nuns from Sean Ross into a house on South Anne Street [Catholic Protection and Rescue Society]. She remembered that she was asked to feed her baby and then he was taken from her. Her father arrived and took her to her married sister's house. She was not allowed to see her friends or siblings. She returned to South Anne Street when she was 18 or 19 to sign some documents.

I probably knew what it was, but I didn't put any emphasis on it. It wasn't like somebody came with me and explained it, as far as I remember.

19.180 Reflecting on her time in Sean Ross, Resident A said:

It is just the way the regime was when you went into these places. They should have like - I should have been treated maybe - maybe I feel I should have got more food, maybe everyone felt it. Maybe a bit more tolerance, because I was so young... Just I think at the age I was and everything, it stopped, you know, dead on. Maybe I could have had a nicer experience, or because I was ignorant really but I suppose everyone was and maybe I shouldn't have had to do so much work, you know, hardship, and maybe organise for a little bit of education in there or something.

Resident B, Mother, early 1960s

19.181 Resident B told the Commission that she became pregnant at the age of 21 When she was seven months pregnant she told her aunt with whom she was living and the aunt arranged her admission to Sean Ross. Her boyfriend (whom she subsequently married) did not know that she had been admitted.

When the door opened and I met this nun, Sister Hildegard I am quite sure it was, I can't memorise that end of it, but I was asked who the father of my child was... So, I said I don't know, and they said what was your mother's name and I said Mary and she said right, she said we will call you Molly. She said go off there and get dressed and there was no more about it.

19.182 She said that all the women in Sean Ross wore uniform clothes. They did not wear their own clothes and that everything, including sanitary towels, was provided for them. She said that she worked minding babies in the nursery during her 14 months stay.

19.183 She said that her time in Sean Ross was 'perfect'. She had been treated as 'slave labour' in her aunt's house and she had not been allowed to progress to secondary school. She said that the nuns were very fond of her and that she had a great relationship with Sister Conrad and Sister Winifred. Her boyfriend visited her in Sean Ross every Saturday but when the nuns found out that he was the father of her child they stopped the visits.

19.184 The birth of her baby went smoothly but she picked up an infection after giving birth. She recovered after some days' rest. She said that she had to breastfeed the baby and did so every morning before going to mass. She said that she could have left Sean Ross shortly after giving birth if she paid the nuns £105 but that she was adamant that she would try to keep her baby. Her boyfriend would not take her and their baby out of the home or marry her in Sean Ross because of what his family would say about it.

It was the time that was in it. You were blackened, your reputation was gone and they kind of didn't want to mix with you. You were stained, you know, at that time, you know.

19.185 Her baby was due to be adopted in America and she signed papers for an 'American adoption'. She said that her boyfriend upset a local priest and the baby was instead given to a couple living four miles from where she lived. She suspects that the parish priest arranged for this to happen. She said that any couple could walk into Sean Ross and adopt a child 'as long as they had money'. She said that the local priest had his 'palm well-greased' for arranging her baby's adoption and that the priest wanted to disgrace her boyfriend.

You and your wife could walk in and go through the nursery. As long as you had money, this is my theory anyhow, you'd go and you can pick what child you like or you can ask their parent, or their we'll say, pedigree in life kind of... You had to give so much money. I think it was what, something around four, about four grand for America and whatever. In Ireland, I don't know.

19.186 She said that she never actually saw any couple handing money over to adopt a child from Sean Ross and that she had 'no evidence whatsoever' that this happened but believes that this was a regular occurrence.

19.187 She said that she was given no other option but to give her baby up for adoption. She had no support in the outside world from anyone. Sister Hildegard told her that her baby was to be adopted by two doctors in the west of Ireland. Sister Hildegard oversaw all adoptions from Sean Ross, and she did not remember ever signing any paperwork in the presence of a solicitor.

You signed where you were told and after that then she could have been sent anywhere. You had no say, only dress your child and bring her to the door and that was it. I handed her over to another girl... and I knew she was gone then, and we ran to the window to watch the car going down the

avenue...Sure I cried my eyes out and that was it. There was no - never mentioned after. You were told then that you were going soon.

Resident C, Mother, mid 1960s

- 19.188 When Resident C became pregnant, her aunt spoke to the local priest and he directed her to the 'Irish Catholic Church Society' [Catholic Rescue and Protection Society] in Dublin who arranged for her admission to Sean Ross. She had no real choice about this decision as her aunt took full control of the situation. She was collected by a car and driver in her hometown and driven to Sean Ross.
- 19.189 Resident C told the Commission that she was given a 'house name' and a number when she was admitted. She did not want this but had no choice but to accept it. She shared a dormitory with ten or twelve other women.
- 19.190 Her incoming and outgoing letters were censored. She wrote to her aunt complaining about the food and one of the nuns read her letter in the dining room and then made her eat it. She said that the food was generally 'horrible'. The women in the home were not allowed to speak to each other. She worked in the shop at Sean Ross with Sister Francis and she remembered that the women listened to music from a record player for around two hours every Sunday afternoon.
- 19.191 She said that her birthing experience in Sean Ross was 'desperate':
- When I went out first, I was called over to the hospital end. I walked over, they arrange to take you over and this horrible man who was the doctor arrived in and I was really afraid. So, I was shoved down in the bed. Legs strapped and this bucket was brought in. So, the bucket was in case I bleed when he examined me. He never spoke to me or nothing. So just did the examination... That was all the attention and then when it came to the actual birth my waters broke and I didn't know what it was and the nun that was in the dormitory nearly went mad because I had wet the floor.
- 19.192 She said that she had not agreed to have her baby adopted and that the adoption procedure was never explained to her. She remembered being brought to see a woman who asked her to sign a form. She suspects that this was the form consenting to her child's adoption. She said that she did not formally consent to have her baby adopted and that she did not sign any final consent forms.

19.193 She bought clothes for her baby for the day that she would leave the home. She was subsequently told by the woman who adopted her baby that the baby was in a nappy and blanket when she received her. The witness suspects that the nuns were selling the same baby clothes multiple times. She recalled one occasion where she was asked to count money with Sister Winifred. She said that the nuns were buying a new safe and had the money in old biscuit tins:

All notes. Money I had never seen before which looked like dollars. So, all in plastic bands. So, I counted it then and passed it to the Sister. She counted it and gave it back to me. I counted it. She finally counted it and then it was registered in the book... I mean but there was quite a lot of tins. Now I can't say if there was money in all of them, but my daughter told me her adoptive mother got letters regularly from them asking by the way how they were and how was the baby and she always sent a donation.

19.194 The witness said that she had no prior notification of the day the adoptive parents would take her child. She said that she hurriedly dressed her baby in new clothes and that she was then taken away by one of the nuns. She became hysterical at that point and does not remember anything else about that day. She left Sean Ross a few days later. She said that a driver drove her to the train station and made some disparaging remarks towards her.

Affidavits received by the Commission

The Commission received a number of affidavits from former residents. These are sworn statements and are reported largely in the words used by the former residents. Unlike those who gave direct evidence, the Commission did not ask any questions of these former residents.

Resident D, Mother, early 1950s

19.195 Resident D became pregnant in at the age of 18. She stated that she was living with her aunt at the time. When her aunt realised that she was pregnant she was taken to a doctor who recommended that she be admitted to Sean Ross. Her brother drove her to Sean Ross accompanied by her aunt. She was admitted when she was seven months pregnant. She remembered that there was a brief hand over before her aunt and brother left her.

I slept in a large dormitory with other women and girls some of whom were pregnant and others who had already had their babies. Most of my memories have been blocked out over the years but I recall being cold at night and that the clothes they gave us to wear were cold and scratchy. No one had any privacy at all. I cannot remember what the food was like, however, I have an abiding memory of always being hungry.

19.196 She said that she worked in the laundry at Sean Ross and that the working day was approximately 8.30am until 4pm.

It was heavy work scrubbing clothes and bedding on boards, washing and ironing all with our bare hands. As far as I could see we were only washing the Abbey's own laundry and that this was not a commercial operation. We worked a six-day week. On Sundays we would attend a number of masses, but we would not work in the laundry. To the extent that the women and girls had any spare time, I recall that we spent a lot of this time knitting clothes for our children.

19.197 She described the regime in Sean Ross was pretty severe but she didn't receive many punishments. She stated that on one occasion she was forced to 'go down on my knees' to publicly apologise to a nun. This was 'just another part of the humiliation and shame' she was subjected to every day. The nuns constantly reminded her that she had 'committed a mortal sin' and that 'her shame would be eternal'. She was given a 'house name'. Women did not discuss their family or their backgrounds. This was all part of the 'shame' she was made to feel every day of her time at Sean Ross. She said that some girls 'ran away' but were 'brought back by the Garda'.

19.198 She said that there was no doctor present during her labour and that 'there was no formal medical care or any kind of pain relief' made available to her. Her labour was 'agonising in accordance with the principle that we had to suffer for our sins'. She gave birth to a healthy boy and spent eight weeks in the maternity hospital looking after her son and breastfeeding him.

19.199 She returned to work in the laundry after eight weeks and she was allowed to spend one hour, 4-5 pm, with her baby. She remembered:

Some of the others had a little money to buy gifts for their children. I had nothing but there was one very kind nun, Sister Annunciata, who would

occasionally give me a bar of chocolate to give him. That same nun took a few photographs of [the baby] and gave them to me. It never occurred to me ask whether I could go home now I had given birth. This was partly because I had nowhere to go. My aunt had disowned me but also because I had to stay until [the baby] was adopted. It was taken for granted that [my baby] would be adopted and it never even crossed my mind that there might be any other option.

19.200 She said that she signed consent to adoption form in the presence of Sister Hildegarde and a man who she assumed was a solicitor. She stated that she was not allowed time to read the document and did what she was told. She said that the contents of the document were never explained to her and she was not asked to formally swear to the document. She said that she was not told when her son would be taken and she was given no information regarding prospective foster parents. She remembered:

When [the baby] was three and a half years old, he was taken away for adoption. I didn't get the chance to say goodbye but the same kind nun, Sister Annunciata, informed me that he was leaving, and I ran upstairs and looked out of the window and saw him getting into a car. There was no discussion about it in advance and I was given no information afterwards other than that he had gone. Being parted from him broke my heart.

19.201 The nuns arranged work for her in a school in the UK and she moved there shortly after her baby was adopted.

19.202 She decided that she would try to contact her son in 2003 when she was 70 years old. She contacted Sister Sarto at Bessborough who told her that her son had been adopted in America but had since died.

19.203 She stated that she was told by her son's adoptive sister and another person that the American couple that adopted her baby 'paid a significant sum of money to Sean Ross Abbey' and that 'they paid annual sums thereafter'. She did not know the details of the sums involved and did not have any documentary evidence.

Affidavits from children born in Sean Ross and adopted to the USA

19.204 Not surprisingly, the children who were born in Sean Ross and adopted to the USA did not have any memories of their time in Sean Ross. Their statements were

mainly concerned with their subsequent attempts to trace their birth mothers. Some provided some anecdotal evidence about money changing hands.

- 19.205 A man who was born in Sean Ross in the early 1960s and was adopted at about the age of three and a half years said he had no memory of his time in Sean Ross but that he had some memory of his flight to his adoptive parents in the USA. He remembered that he was one of four children sent to the USA together in the care of an elderly woman and a priest. He remembered being met by his adoptive parents on his arrival in America. He had seen financial statements showing that his adoptive parents paid money to the nuns at Sean Ross, but his recollection was that this related to itemised expenses such as the cost of his flight to the USA. The supporting letter shows that the cost of his flight to America was paid directly to Pan American World Airways Systems. His adoptive parents paid Pan America \$273.40 for a half or child's ticket. The Congregation of the Sacred Hearts billed his adoptive parents \$142.00 to cover one quarter of the accompanying guardian's air fare (the guardian accompanied four children on the same flight) and their expenses. It would appear that the expenses received by the congregation amounted to \$6.00.
- 19.206 Two other statements dealt with the question of money changing hands in such adoptions. One man said that his adoptive parents did not believe that they thought that they were 'buying' a child from Ireland. One woman said that she had been told by a HSE employee that her adoption had been arranged through the 'black market'.
- 19.207 One woman who was born in Sean Ross in the late 1950s outlined what her mother had told her about her (the mother's) stay in Sean Ross. Her mother told her that she had become pregnant aged 15 years and that her family sent her to Sean Ross. Her mother's family were prepared to let her marry the father of her child, a much older man, but she declined to do so. Her mother told her that she had 'suffered badly at the hands of the nuns' at Sean Ross. Her mother said that she had been tied to a bed when she was in labour and that 'a nun sat on her chest' to make her push. Her mother told her that the nuns did not give her nappies and was 'actively prevented from bonding' with her. Her mother said that she was back 'working in the fields and laundry' two days after giving birth.

Evidence of local people to the Commission

Workman 1980s

- 19.208 The workman told the Commission that he worked at Sean Ross in the 1980s. He remembered repairing the pillars and chains that delineated the infants' burial ground. He said that the burial ground was in a general state of neglect at that time. The workmen knew that the site was a graveyard but were not told that it was an infants' graveyard. The nuns' graveyard was in much better order than the 'baby plot'.
- 19.209 The infants' graveyard area was cleared of briars and sprayed with weed killers. Some time later a tractor was brought onto the site to prepare the ground for grass seed. Shortly after this work commenced, he noticed 'lots of small bones' in the ground. He was not present for the rest of the groundwork, but he believes that workers brought a small rotavator onto the site and put down grass seed. He believes that the work to clean up the graveyard was undertaken at the behest of Sister Priscilla.

Local resident

- 19.210 A local resident told the Commission that he was a carpenter and worker with Maher's Undertakers in Roscrea in the mid-1950s. He said that an order came in from the Sean Ross mother and baby home every October for 'six to ten 18-inch to 21-inch coffins'. He knew a man who buried infants at Sean Ross and this man had said that infants at Sean Ross were buried without coffins in 'quick lime'. The local resident believed that the coffins which were ordered from the undertakers where he worked were for children born to the daughters of 'respectable farmers' who would have buried their children in a family plot.