

Chapter 20: Castlepollard

Introduction

20.1 Castlepollard mother and baby home was opened in 1935 and closed in 1971. During that time, 4,972 women were admitted; 4,559 children were born there 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 Castlepollard but there were a small number of ‘private’ patients.

Sources

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

Institutional records

20.3 Castlepollard institutional records are held by the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA). As already reported, the Commission made digital copies of these records. There are about 8,000 records.

The institutional records include:

- Admission Books
- Records and Particulars Books/Maternity Registers of the maternity hospital (which was known as St Peter’s).
- Ante-natal Records
- Private Patients Register
- Babies Register
- Indoor Register, Co Leitrim
- Baptismal Register
- Adoption Orders
- Death Register

Department of Health

20.4 The main Department of Health files used for this chapter are:
INACT/INA/0/425115
INACT/INA/0/465642

NATARCH/ARC/0/403458
NATARCH/ARC/0/413869
INACT/INA/0/450268
INACT/INA/0/450464
INACT/INA/0/455744
INACT/INA/0/426512
National Archives Ireland (NAI), H31/8/4
NAI, A104/2

Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Congregational Archive

- 20.5 See Chapter 17.

Meath Diocesan Archive

- 20.6 DM/MBH/C/8-9; 25 January 1971.

Other sources

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

Origins

- 20.8 In 1924, the Meath Board of Health discussed reports that unmarried mothers and their children were ‘accumulating in large numbers’ in Trim county home. Board members considered setting up a standalone ward in the county home to accommodate unmarried mothers and wrote to the Westmeath Board of Health and local authorities in neighbouring counties seeking their support.
- 20.9 A Westmeath councillor told his board that a very large number of unmarried mothers were housed in Mullingar county home also. He proposed that unmarried mothers in Meath and Westmeath should be removed to a standalone institution where they could be ‘put to work’. He considered it a scandal that ratepayers should ‘foot the bill’ for maintaining unmarried mothers and their children and that if the women were put to work then ratepayers would be ‘relieved of this responsibility’.¹ The Westmeath councillor’s remarks mirrored the views expressed by members of the Meath board who proposed that unmarried mothers should be housed in a central institution to undertake laundry work for other institutions in

¹ *Westmeath Independent*, 15 November 1924.

Meath and adjoining counties and to engage in poultry and dairy farming with a view to supplying eggs and milk to same.²

- 20.10 The discussions about the maintenance of unmarried mothers and their children in Meath was sparked by a letter from the Department of Local Government and Public Health (DLGPH) regarding ‘illegitimate’ children who were sent by the Meath board to St Joseph’s Industrial School, Artane, with some regularity.³ The department advised that, although these children were ‘illegitimate’, they were ‘not criminals’ and that Artane was an institution for youths convicted of an offence. Faced with the prospect of having many unaccompanied ‘illegitimate’ children returned to Trim county home the Meath board was forced to reconsider the provision of services for the institutional care of unmarried mothers and their children.⁴
- 20.11 In 1927 the *Report of the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor* gave an overview of facilities at Mullingar county home. The Commission found that sanitary and bathing conditions in the home were ‘insufficient’ and that the ‘aged and infirm, chronic invalids, idiots, imbeciles, unmarried mothers and their children’ were housed together in the institution. The commission reported that accommodation for unmarried mothers and their children in Mullingar was ‘bad’ and ‘wanting in comfort’. It further stated that a maternity department for single women was attached to the home along with a separate maternity department for ‘respectable women’. In light of the commission’s report, the Westmeath Board agreed that separate accommodation should be provided for unmarried mothers in the county and that such a need ‘had been apparent for years’.⁵
- 20.12 A report on Mullingar county home, undertaken three years later, suggests that the Westmeath board had not provided any alternative accommodation for unmarried mothers and children outside of the county home and had not addressed the very poor living conditions in the institution. Reporting on the accommodation available to unmarried mothers, a local government inspector, Mr McLysaght, noted that
- The sleeping quarters had no heat or ventilation;
 - The milk supply to the institution was suspect;

² *Meath Chronicle*, 25 October 1924.

³ Ryan Report: <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/rpt/01-07.php>

⁴ *Meath Chronicle*, 25 October 1924.

⁵ *Westmeath Examiner*, 8 October 1927.

- The institution was poorly lit and without proper lavatory accommodation;
 - Sanitary conditions were less than satisfactory;
 - Drainage was not in a proper state; and
 - There was no disinfecting apparatus in the institution.
- 20.13 The inspector concluded that the Westmeath board should provide better and more suitable accommodation for single women and their children in the county.⁶
- 20.14 In December 1930, the Westmeath board discussed the costs of maintaining unmarried mothers. The board was told that 22 'illegitimate' children were living in Mullingar county home at a weekly cost of £1 each to ratepayers. One councillor claimed that some unmarried women living there had three and four children and argued that the men responsible should be taken to court and forced to contribute to their maintenance. The chairman pointed out that the 'moral aspect of the matter' was not up for discussion by the board but agreed that steps should be taken 'to make the fathers of the children pay up'. The board subsequently issued proceedings against seven men identified by women as the putative fathers of their children but made no attempt to improve living conditions in Mullingar county home.⁷

Manor House, Castlepollard

- 20.15 In May 1933, Mrs Crofts, a local government inspector, wrote to the Superior General of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary to ask if the congregation would consider opening a third mother and baby home in Ireland, in the diocese of Meath (the congregation already ran Bessborough and Sean Ross). The congregation 'reluctantly' accepted the offer on the basis that a refusal might impact negatively on its future work in Ireland and gave an undertaking to source a suitable property. Early in 1935, the congregation purchased Kinturk House⁸ (Manor House), Castlepollard, for £5,000.⁹ The estate had been vacant for a number of years and, although the main house was substantial, it was reportedly not in good repair at the time of purchase.¹⁰

⁶ *Westmeath Examiner*, 11 January 1930.

⁷ *Westmeath Independent*, 6 December 1930.

⁸ National Inventory of Archaeological Heritage; 'Kinturk House, Dublin Road, Castlepollard, County Westmeath'.

<http://www.buildingsofireland.ie/niah/search.jsp?type=record&county=WM®no=15302016>

⁹ *Westmeath Examiner*, 6 February 1965.

¹⁰ *Westmeath Examiner*, 22 June 1935.

- 20.16 The congregation spent £1,000 on renovations and, on opening, Castlepollard mother and baby home had accommodation for 37 women and 20 children. In 1937, the congregation applied to the DLGPH for a grant from the Hospitals Trust Fund to extend and improve the institution and to construct a maternity hospital onsite. The estimated cost of the works was £55,950 and the Hospitals Trust sanctioned a grant of £25,000 towards the project. The DLGPH subsequently committed to provide a grant worth £65,000 to the hospital building project and, in November 1942, the new St Peter's Hospital opened at Castlepollard with capacity to accommodate 109 women and their children.
- 20.17 In March 1935, Mrs Crofts told the Meath board that Castlepollard was about to open under the stewardship of Sister Leontia. Mrs Crofts described the institution as a home for unmarried mothers who were 'first offenders' with a maternity home attached to cater for single expectant women and their babies. She said that Bishop Mulvaney of Meath had given his blessing to the new home and was confident that such an institution would give women a chance to 're-establish themselves in life' and 'induce them to accept responsibility for the maintenance of their children'. She also said that the congregation would procure positions for the women on discharge and that mothers would bear the cost of maintenance for their children when they secured employment. The Meath board agreed to support a scheme where women from County Meath would be admitted to Castlepollard if it meant the 'redemption' of those 'unfortunate girls'.¹¹ In June 1935, the Meath Board of Health requested approval from the DLGPH to include Castlepollard as a recognised extern institution.¹²
- 20.18 In May 1935, the Cavan Board of Health considered a request from the Minister for Local Government and Public Health to send 'first time' unmarried mothers to Castlepollard instead of the county home. The board considered that time spent in Castlepollard would be 'very beneficial' to such women and, more importantly, would result in a 'substantial financial saving' to Cavan county council. The board agreed to notify dispensary medical officers in the county to send all 'first time' single expectant women to Castlepollard. However, when Sister Leontia asked the Cavan board to assume responsibility for the first Cavan woman admitted to

¹¹ *Meath Chronicle*, 2 March 1935.

¹² *Meath Chronicle*, 1 June 1935.

Castlepollard, it refused to do so on the basis that the putative father was from Westmeath.¹³

- 20.19 Castlepollard opened for admissions in June 1935 and by the end of March 1936, 60 single expectant women and 12 women accompanied by a child had sought admission there. Thirty eight births and four infant deaths were notified in this period. The DLGPH report for the year ending 31 March 1936 recorded that 51 women and 33 children were living there. In the year ending March 1937, the department reported that 76 women were admitted. Sixty six births and ten infant deaths were notified during this time. On 31 March 1937, 56 women and 48 children were living there. Mrs Crofts had stated that Castlepollard, when it opened, had accommodation for 37 women and 20 children. Occupancy rates recorded in March 1937 suggest that the home was already grossly overcrowded.

- 20.20 The Hospitals Commission's *Second General Report 1935 & 1936* stated that Castlepollard was an extension of activities for the care of unmarried mothers under the control of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts in operation in Bessborough and Sean Ross. The Hospitals Commission acknowledged that such 'specialised institutions' could not be provided in every county and necessitated the support of several counties to meet the cost of their maintenance and administration. The report noted that Castlepollard served the counties of Westmeath, Meath, Cavan and Offaly and that proposals to extend accommodation to 100 beds would allow it to also cater for counties Longford, Louth and Monaghan. The report concluded:

The completion of the institution will go far towards meeting the requirements of the scheme initiated by the department [DLGPH] for dealing in an enlightened manner with a particularly important aspect of the unmarried mother problem.

- 20.21 The establishment of Castlepollard was not universally approved. In October 1937, the matron of Trim county home told the Meath Board of Health that the lack of unmarried women being admitted to the county home had made it difficult to run the institution. The matron explained that the lack of 'helpers' in the laundry meant that those working there were unable to get through their daily workload. Furthermore, the matron complained that there was no 'maid' to cook for the

¹³ *Meath Chronicle*, 4 May 1935.

nurses and to keep their apartments, that nurses had to undertake these chores themselves and that this arrangement was ‘unsatisfactory’.¹⁴ In another instance, the board received complaints of ‘undesirable practice’ in the county maternity hospital, Trim, where married expectant women were attended by ‘unmarried mothers’ living in the county home. The board decided that this practice should cease immediately and that alternative arrangements should be put in place.¹⁵

- 20.22 In the year ending March 1938, the DLGPH reported that 83 women were admitted to Castlepollard. During the same period 23 women were discharged to employment, 47 returned to their family home and three left to marry. Three maternal deaths were notified. Seventy five children were either born in, or admitted to, the home during this period. Three infant deaths were notified. Fifty one children were discharged with their mothers, ten were boarded out and four were informally ‘adopted’ through a society. On 31 March 1938, 64 women and 55 children were living there which suggests that overcrowding endured in the institution.

- 20.23 The DLGPH reported that, in the year ending March 1939, 78 women were admitted to Castlepollard. In the same period 29 were discharged to employment, 37 returned to the family home and two left to marry. One maternal death was notified. Seventy three children were either born in, or admitted to, the home in this period. Five infant deaths were notified. Forty children were discharged with their mothers, eight were boarded out and eight were informally ‘adopted’ through a society. On 31 March 1939, 69 women and 60 children were living in the home. The number of women living in Castlepollard in March 1939 was almost twice the number that it was considered could be accommodated. Similarly, the number of children living in the home at that time was three times more than the home was supposed to accommodate.

The 1940s

- 20.24 In January 1940, an inquest into the death of an infant born in Castlepollard was held in the district hospital, Athlone. The infant left Castlepollard with his mother in December 1939 having spent six months in the institution. The woman had arranged that a private nursing home in Athlone would take herself and her child.

¹⁴ *Meath Chronicle*, 2 October 1937.

¹⁵ *Meath Chronicle*, 27 November 1937.

However, the child died one week after discharge. The jury heard that the infant had been 'weak from birth' and that the Sisters in Castlepollard had been reluctant to let him leave. The coroner told the jury that the child had died of malnutrition due to congenital deformity of the large intestine.¹⁶

- 20.25 In the year ending March 1940, the DLGPH reported that 101 women were admitted to Castlepollard. In the same period 29 left to take up employment and 53 returned to the family home. Two maternal deaths were notified. Eighty eight children were either born in, or admitted to, the home in this period. Thirteen infant deaths were notified. Thirty eight children were discharged with their mothers, 26 were boarded out and five were informally adopted through a society. On 31 March 1940, 81 women and 62 children were resident in the home.

- 20.26 In its report for the year ending March 1941, the DLGPH reported that 135 women were admitted to the home. In the same period 49 were discharged to employment, 56 returned to their family home and six left to marry. Two maternal deaths were notified. During this period, 117 children were either born in, or were admitted to, the institution. Thirty four infant deaths were notified. General Register Office (GRO) records show that eleven infant deaths notified in this period were attributable to whooping cough and a further three were due to influenza. The remaining twenty deaths were notified as either prematurity or congenital debility. Twenty nine infants were discharged with their mothers, 27 were informally adopted through a society and seven were boarded out.

Inspection 1941

- 20.27 In March 1941, the DLGPH inspector, Miss Litster, inspected Castlepollard. She noted that there were 109 women living in the home at the time of her inspection; 104 were public patients - 18 expectant and 86 post-natal patients. All five private patients were expectant women. There were 86 children living in the home. These numbers suggest that the institution housed three times more women and more than four times more children than it was supposed to accommodate. Taking 50 square feet (4.6 square metres) as the minimum desirable living space per patient, Miss Litster calculated that maximum occupancy in Castlepollard 'without putting undue pressure on space' should be 40 women and their babies. She

¹⁶ *Westmeath Independent*, 6 January 1940.

further stated that, even if occupancy was limited to 40 women and their babies; extra space would still be required for day use.

- 20.28 Miss Litster reported that the main building was severely overcrowded and, although it was suitable to accommodate around 40 women, 70 were living there. An additional 44 women were sleeping in a loft over stables located 'some distance away from the main house'. She calculated that Castlepollard housed around 70 women more than it could accommodate and that overcrowding among the adult population of the home was 'severe'. The 86 children were accommodated in rooms suitable for around half that number. In the year ended March 1941, 34 infants had died in Castlepollard.¹⁷ Miss Litster instructed Sister Leontia to close the home to new admissions and the department instructed local authorities to send women to Bessborough and Sean Ross until overcrowding had eased at Castlepollard. The institutional records show that only one woman was admitted to the home between 20 March 1941 and 27 February 1942 which suggests that the congregation had complied with Miss Litster's direction to cease admissions. Four infant deaths were notified in Castlepollard in the twelve months following Miss Litster's intervention whereas 34 infant deaths had been notified in the preceding 12 months.
- 20.29 Miss Litster reported that the home and maternity hospital were staffed by ten members of the congregation, a nurse and a certified midwife. There was no nurse on night duty in any section of the institution and the procedure appeared to be that one resident sat with women in labour and a nurse was called when necessary. The maternity ward was a large and bright room, with three beds and four cots, heated by a log fire and radiator. The attached dormitories were clean but were grossly overcrowded.

The dormitories are all clean and bright, those on the top floor have low ceilings. Each bed has two blankets and a good mattress. No provision of any kind for hanging or placing clothes at night. Work clothes are generally thrown on the beds-a practice not conducive to cleanliness. No lockers are provided for personal effects. No chairs...The degree of overcrowding at present would not in fact permit the addition of chairs and lockers in most of the dormitories.

¹⁷ DLGPH, *Report for the year 1940-41*

- 20.30 The living space above the stables was occupied by women and older children. A large space with six windows and no means of heating contained 27 beds with three blankets for each bed. The space was overcrowded. The second loft space was a smaller room with four windows and no means of heating. There was no ceiling in the room and the exposed roof was damaged. This room had 17 beds with three blankets for each bed. Two members of the congregation also shared a small room in the stables. There was one clean WC available for the 44 women living there.
- 20.31 Miss Litster reported that Castlepollard had no recreational areas. There was one room with a large table, three sewing machines and an apparatus for winding wool. The dining room, located in a basement, was 'dark and gloomy'. She counted 95 women eating dinner there and stated that 'there was not elbow room for each'. She observed that 'less than half that number might be accommodated with some degree of comfort'. She noted that the dinner served that day consisted of peppered herring, potatoes and rice pudding.
- 20.32 Miss Litster reported that the main nursery, housing infants up to twelve months old, was a large 'airy and bright' room with two large wards heated by fireplaces and radiators. It contained 34 cots and a bed for one woman, a resident and not a nurse, who attended to the babies. The cots were comfortable and clean but the ward was overcrowded. A second nursery was also airy and bright and heated by a log fire and radiators. This had nine cots with 15 infants; some cots had three infants in them. A nursery for toddlers, aged over twelve months, was also an 'airy and bright' room heated by radiators but was also overcrowded. This room contained 28 cots and a bed occupied by one of the mothers.
- 20.33 A day nursery was heated by a log fire and radiators. It had three cots and a playpen and was occupied by about 40 toddlers during the day. Miss Litster reported that this room was so overcrowded that there was no room for play materials. Some children slept in cots behind their mother's beds. There were 12 children aged over two years in the home with their mothers. Miss Litster instructed Sister Leontia to notify the local authorities responsible for their maintenance to have them boarded out as the discharge of these children and their mothers would help to alleviate overcrowding. Miss Litster advised the department that the extent of the overcrowding at Castlepollard was 'a danger to the health of women and children living there' and asked that the planned new

hospital would be expedited so that some residents could be transferred there. She also raised concerns about the absence of a fire escape from the upper floor of the main building.

- 20.34 In April 1941, another DLGPH inspector, Dr Dillon, visited Castlepollard. She confirmed that there had been no admissions since 11 March of that year. At the time of her visit, there were 93 women and 84 children living there. She noted that the maternity ward was staffed by two members of the congregation, qualified in general nursing and midwifery, one qualified midwife and one infants nurse. Dr Dillon reported that the ‘trained nuns’ were always on night duty in the maternity ward¹⁸ and that the other members of the congregation undertook general duties. She stated that it was still overcrowded and that she could offer no remedy until the new buildings would be available to accommodate women. A note on her memorandum stated:

The conditions here are very bad and admissions should be stopped until such time as the overcrowding is reduced. There is a serious menace to health in the present conditions.

- 20.35 In May 1942, just over a year later, Miss Litster and Dr Dillon together inspected Castlepollard. At the time of their visit 56 women and 57 children were living there. All 12 children aged over two years, whom Miss Litster recorded on her previous visit, were still in the home with their mothers. The Meath, Westmeath, Cavan and Monaghan boards responsible for their maintenance had failed to get foster homes for them. The inspectors advised the DLGPH to insist that children aged two years or over not be kept in the home and that local authorities responsible for their maintenance should make a better effort to secure foster homes for them. The inspectors reported that the new maternity hospital at Castlepollard would be ready for occupation in June 1942, that a maximum occupancy should be set and that the authorities at the home should be compelled to adhere to it.

- 20.36 In June 1943, Dr Dillon inspected the newly constructed St Peter’s Maternity Hospital. Sister Marie Celine Murphy, a registered nurse and midwife, was the matron. There were two nurses and two midwives employed there and they were assisted by women living in the home. The hospital had two eight-bed wards, two one-bed wards for private patients and an observation room with one bed. There

¹⁸ This is at variance with Miss Litster’s report of a month earlier.

were two bathrooms and three WCs. The hospital was clean, well-kept and adequately staffed and the accommodation and sanitary facilities were acceptable. However, she was critical of the food women received in the hospital. The diet was not sufficient for nursing mothers as 'no porridge or gruel was provided'. She also found that no admission register was available for viewing which was a breach of the *Registration of Maternity Homes Act 1934*. While the department followed up on the matter of the admission register with the authorities at Castlepollard they do not appear to have addressed the inadequacy of the diet.

- 20.37 In January 1944, the DLGPH sent an architect and a clerk of works to inspect the maternity hospital. Although the building was newly constructed in 1942, serious structural defects were detected over the subsequent 18 months. Minor defects were initially addressed by the building contractor but by 1944 a crack extending across the front of the building was severe enough to let rain in. As a result, the architect reported 'great damp' in the walls of the building 'made worse by continual condensation' due to lack of proper heating. He noted that although the hospital boiler was fired by 'green logs' the circulating pumps were not working. The architect's report concluded that the heating in the building was wholly inadequate and that, while radiators in some parts of the building were warm, most were 'icy cold'. It transpired that the circulating pumps in the hospital were never turned on because they consumed too much electricity. This was because the institution had been supplying electricity to the town of Castlepollard since 1941. The main power station serving the town was destroyed in a fire in 1941 and Manor House had supplied power to the town as a temporary measure. However, the institution continued to provide power until January 1948 when the town was connected to the national grid.

Agreement about new maternity hospital

- 20.38 The congregation had received a grant of £65,000 from the Hospitals Trust Fund to build the maternity hospital on the condition that the building would be used as a maternity home to cater for 'unmarried mothers' and 'expectant unmarried mothers' sent there by public assistance authorities or by the Minister for Local Government and Public Health under the *Public Hospitals Acts 1933-40*. The congregation undertook to maintain such women and to provide them with all necessary nursing, food, medicine, and medical and surgical attendance free of charge. The congregation agreed to undertake this work in return for per capita maintenance rates agreed between the congregation and public assistance authorities. The

congregation also agreed that authorised officers from the DLGPH could enter and inspect the home at all reasonable times and interview the ‘inmates’. The terms of the Hospitals Trust Fund grant also stipulated that, if Castlepollard ceased to operate as a mother and baby home, ownership of the estate would transfer to the DLGPH. The congregation later inserted a clause in the agreement enabling them to refuse admission to public patients ‘suffering from disease’, women with a ‘vicious history’ and women who had been in prison.

- 20.39 In February 1944, Dr Dillon inspected the maternity hospital. Sister Marie Celine was still matron of the hospital and one nurse and one midwife were employed and assisted by ‘non-paid waiting patients’. Dr Dillon discovered that the nurse employed in the maternity hospital had failed her final exams and was not a registered nurse. It appears that Sister Marie Celine was aware that the woman had failed her final exams and stated that she was in the hospital as an ‘assistant’ and had not delivered any babies. There were serious problems with the building - the electric lift was not in working order, hot water was not always available, heating pipes were not working at one end of the hospital and plaster was falling off walls throughout the building. The records prescribed by the maternity homes regulations were up to date and available for inspection. The Mother Superior, Sister Leontia, gave the DLGPH an undertaking to refer all building defects to the congregation’s consulting engineer and not to employ unqualified nursing personnel.

Criminal charges 1944

- 20.40 In May 1944, six soldiers were charged before Mullingar Circuit Court with committing a serious offence (defilement of a girl under the age of 15) against a 13-year-old girl contrary to the provisions of Section 1 of the *Criminal Law Amendment Act 1935*. The girl gave birth in Castlepollard in January 1944. The institutional records show that the child died in Castlepollard aged two weeks. The cause of death was given as atelectasis, a common complication in premature infants. None of the soldiers was convicted. In the same sitting, two other soldiers pleaded guilty to the sexual assault of underage girls and were sentenced to three and nine months, respectively. The judge commented that he did not want to suggest that Westmeath was ‘in a bad way’ but expressed his concern at the

number of cases of ‘defilement of the young’ that were coming before the court in the county.¹⁹

Complaints about conditions in the institution 1945

- 20.41 In January 1945, a Westmeath councillor told the county council that women resident in Castlepollard were compelled to undertake manual work ‘more suitable to men’ and that ‘girls’ had to ‘cut timber and wield heavy sledges in all kinds of weather clad in overalls’. He said that conditions in the home were ‘uncivilised’ and ‘like the days of slavery’. The councillor had not verified these claims himself but had read about them in a report of a meeting of Meath county council in the *Meath Chronicle*. The Westmeath councillors protested that Meath county council had no jurisdiction to discuss matters relating to an institution located in Westmeath and told the councillor ‘not to read accusations against the nuns at Castlepollard’ in the council chambers.²⁰ In a letter to the editor of the *Westmeath Examiner*, a Meath councillor restated the claims made against the authorities at Castlepollard and claimed that he was drawing attention to the matter as the institution was ‘extensively subsidised’ by public monies. He said that he had submitted all the information available to him to ‘the appropriate Minister’ and called for a Commission of Inquiry be set up to hear evidence regarding Castlepollard.²¹
- 20.42 The Meath councillor wrote to Dr Ward, the Parliamentary Secretary at the DLGPH to register the complaints made to him and asked that the department set up a Commission of Inquiry, to include ‘five persons experienced in Social Welfare Work and at least two married women’. He outlined the complaints:
- The ‘girls’ in Castlepollard were cutting up timber in adjoining woods, until the onset of their labour and again after their confinements and they were also carrying out other seasonal forms of farm work unsuited to their physique.
 - The ‘girls’ were undernourished and heavily overworked and they started at 5.30 am.
 - For most of the year the nurseries were unheated with open windows and the children were lightly clothed.

¹⁹ *Westmeath Independent*, 13 May 1944.

²⁰ *Westmeath Examiner*, 20 January 1945; Meath county council had the same relationship with Castlepollard as did Westmeath; they each paid for some residents.

²¹ *Westmeath Examiner*, 10 February 1945.

- The infants were changed to spoon feeding at the age of two months and then to a diet consisting of potatoes and soup at six months which appeared to him to be contrary to all recognised methods of child dietetics.
- The infants were put in their cots at 6 pm and there was no further feeding until the following morning.
- In order to avoid soiling the floors, children, when suffering from diarrhoea, had been kept on nursery chairs for so long that the intestines were known to have on occasion protruded.
- The death rate for infants was unduly high, and on occasion there were four or five deaths on one day.
- Discipline generally was unduly harsh and mothers have been beaten, or otherwise ill-treated.

20.43 He said that, if any of the allegations was true, the institution was not fulfilling its primary purpose of ‘reforming’ women who were ‘more sinned against than sinning’. He said that he was asked to bring the matter to the minister’s notice by a former resident of the home who had made the claims. He argued that councils, including Meath county council, were expending ‘large sums of public monies’ to maintain women and babies in Castlepollard and that each county should have visiting committees to undertake ‘on the spot’ checks in the home.²² He asked the minister to consider sending the departmental inspector on ‘surprise’ visits to Castlepollard and suggested that ‘a widow who was herself a mother’ would be better placed to assess the care of mothers and babies in the home.

20.44 In February 1945, Miss Litster met the Meath councillor to discuss his claims. She told him that the method of feeding infants at Castlepollard was in line with modern practice and that any inquiry based on his own assumptions of what constituted good infant feeding practices would fail. She agreed with his assertion that infant mortality rates in Castlepollard were high but told him that they were not as high as those in other similar institutions. The Castlepollard institutional records show that 17 infant deaths were notified in the twelve months that the complainant had lived there suggesting that the allegation that infants were dying at a rate of four or five every day was unfounded. Miss Litster reported that the councillor did not agree with her view that manual work and especially outdoor work was ‘desirable’ for

²² The Commission has not been able to establish if the various inspections by the DLGPH were notified in advance or were unannounced.

women in Castlepollard. Miss Litster considered that the women were, for the most part, 'young, healthy country girls, accustomed to farm work and country life'. She undertook to interview the woman who made the complaint and to discuss all her allegations with the Mother Superior, Sister Leontia.

- 20.45 Miss Litster met the 21-year-old former resident of Castlepollard who had made the complaint to the councillor. Miss Litster described her as 'a big robust girl, plump, rosy-cheeked, healthy in appearance and full of animal spirits, well over 10 stone in weight'. Miss Litster observed that, if she had been given insufficient food during her twelve months stay in Castlepollard, she would not be in the physical condition in which she found her. Miss Litster examined the baby in his foster home. The foster mother claimed that the baby was in poor condition when she received him and that he was 'very thin and ravenously hungry'. Miss Litster reported that the child was 'a fine child, normal in size and weight, healthy in appearance with good colour, teeth normal, limbs straight and flesh firm'. She observed that, if the child had been emaciated when the foster mother received him, he could not have become such a healthy child in such a short time. Miss Litster advised the councillor that the claims made by the former resident regarding the feeding of herself or her baby would not be likely to be proved at an inquiry.
- 20.46 The former resident told Miss Litster that she spent about six hours a day felling trees at Castlepollard and she described the process of using a wedge, sledgehammer and cross-cutting saw. Miss Litster noted that allegations that women were felling trees in Castlepollard had also been made in 1942. She said that on that occasion Sister Leontia undertook not to allow patients to be engaged in the felling of trees but did not acknowledge that women were ever employed in such work. Sister Leontia rejected the former resident's claim that she had been felling trees but stated that women were engaged in cutting logs for firewood as well as ordinary farm work in the garden, milking cows and feeding livestock. Miss Litster reported that there could be 'no objection to this kind of work which provides good physical exercise and helps to maintain the health of the patients'. Miss Litster concluded her report by stating that none of the claims made by the former resident would hold up to the scrutiny of an inquiry. However, she acknowledged that the conduct of the institution had not been 'wholly satisfactory'. She stated that Sister Leontia was 'somewhat hard' and 'did not err on the side of generosity'. She noted that Castlepollard had been closed temporarily in 1942 owing to

overcrowding and unsatisfactory conditions and ‘the housing of patients in an outhouse’.

- 20.47 After his meeting with Miss Litster, the Meath councillor wrote to Dr Ward to thank him for the ‘prompt and diligent attention’ given to his complaint and that he was ‘fully confident’ to leave the whole matter in Miss Litster’s ‘very capable hands’. He withdrew his request for an inquiry and said that he was satisfied that the issues raised could be addressed without a public inquiry and could be remedied under Miss Litster’s direction.
- 20.48 The Westmeath councillor continued to pursue the issue. Westmeath county council decided to send a delegation to Castlepollard to investigate.²³ In March 1945, seven council members, including the county manager and a local TD reported on their visit to Castlepollard. The report which was read to the council stated: ‘We inspected the institution on the invitation of the Reverend Mother...We were agreeably surprised to find such a well-run and up-to-date institution in the County and was a credit to the Sisters’. The committee stated that they saw and interviewed the mothers there and found them to be ‘happy and contented’ and that the children were ‘clean, well-dressed and healthy’. The committee concluded that they were satisfied that the institution was administered in ‘a highly creditable and efficient manner’ and that ‘there were no grounds whatsoever for complaint’. The councillor who had instigated the visit reluctantly agreed with the committee’s findings but protested that the council should have the power to undertake surprise visits to the institution. The visiting committee concluded that there was no truth in the allegations made against the institution and that ‘the unfortunate unmarried mothers of the county and their babies were well catered for’.²⁴
- 20.49 A DLGPH memorandum on Miss Litster’s inquiries noted that ‘the lady [Sister Leontia] requires watching. What is the infant mortality rate in this place’. Miss Litster provided data on infant mortality in Castlepollard for the years ended March 1941 to March 1944 which showed that the infant mortality rate had decreased from 30% to 10% over this period. Although the department acknowledged that infant mortality had been greatly reduced, the rate was still too high. The department told Sister Leontia that it would not be satisfied until infant mortality was reduced to a rate of 2%. Sister Leontia replied that the congregation had

²³ *Westmeath Examiner*, 10 February 1945.

²⁴ *Westmeath Examiner*, 17 March 1945.

made every effort to reduce infant mortality and that the rate had decreased further in the year ended March 1945. However, she said:

I would point out that we are dealing with a class of mothers who in the vast majority of cases, does not want the baby to survive and we get little cooperation from them.

- 20.50 The department also asked if Wassermann tests were being used to identify venereal disease in Castlepollard. Sister Leontia said that the local authority maintenance rates applicable at that time would not justify the cost of undertaking routine blood tests. She stated that the maintenance allowance was 'hardly sufficient' to maintain women and children and reminded the department that the congregation was paying off a large overdraft having built the maternity hospital. She further said that patients who tested positive for venereal disease required treatment which would incur further outlay of monies which the congregation did not have. The congregation had no objection to carrying out Wasserman tests or to providing treatment for those who tested positive but asked for any suggestions as to where they could get the extra funding this would involve.
- 20.51 In July 1945, the department told Sister Leontia that it would not object to an increase in local authority maintenance rates and approved the following rates:
- Expectant mothers 15s each
 - Children 15s each
 - Mother and child 27s 6d
 - Post-partum mothers 12s 6d each.
- 20.52 The department stipulated that the increased rates should result in extra nourishment for expectant mothers and should cover the costs associated with Wasserman tests and childhood immunisation.
- 20.53 In January 1946, the *Meath Chronicle* reported on a case where a 23-year-old man was charged with having 'carnal knowledge' of a 'feeble-minded' 29-year-old woman. The woman had given birth in Castlepollard in August 1945. The medical officer, Dr Cullen, gave evidence that the woman was 'of low mentality' and that anyone in frequent contact with her should have been able to judge that she was feeble-minded. The accused denied being the father of the child but admitted having 'carnal knowledge' of the woman whom he did not consider to be 'feeble-

minded'. The jury returned a guilty verdict and he was sentenced to twelve months hard labour.²⁵

Financial problems

- 20.54 In February 1948, the Mother Superior in Castlepollard, Sister Helena, told the Department of Health that the congregation would not be in a position to keep Castlepollard operational unless something was done to help them offset their accumulating annual deficit. The department acknowledged that the institution had accumulated substantial deficits from at least 1945 and, following a consideration of the applicable capitation rates, one departmental source wrote:

I am not at all surprised that there is a deficit in the working of the institution as it must be quite impossible to maintain mothers and children at any proper standard for these rates. At the time they were fixed the rates for patients in voluntary hospitals were £2.12.6 per week for adults and 35/- per week for children. It has since been recognised that it costs just as much to maintain a child as an adult and that they are in fact more troublesome and need more attention. It is likely that much of the work in this institution is done by mothers thereby enabling the costs to be reduced. Nevertheless, the capitation charges are in my view, too small.

- 20.55 In May 1948, Miss Litster again inspected Castlepollard. One hundred and thirty one women and 135 children were living there at the time of her visit. There were eight babies in the maternity hospital and all but one were being breastfed. The infants were normal and healthy except for one whom she described as 'a Mongol, marasmic' with a bad hernia from birth. There were 32 infants in the infants section; all but two were being breastfed and they appeared healthy on the whole. She noted that the infants were outside in cots, that most were 'already tanned', and that a shade protected them from direct sunlight. There were 40 older children whom she said appeared normal and healthy except one described as a 'marasmic infant'. There were 55 toddlers playing outside and all seemed to be healthy and contented. Three toddlers, whom Miss Litster described as 'mentally defective', were also living in the home. Two of these were aged three and five years respectively. The Department of Health had previously instructed Cavan county council to make alternative arrangements for these children but was told that no suitable alternatives could be found. The third child, a two-year-old girl described

²⁵ *Meath Chronicle*, 26 January 1946.

as 'an imbecile', was born to a private patient who had left the home without her child. The congregation received no maintenance payments for this child and her mother had refused to consent to admit her to a specialist institution.

- 20.56 In the period 1 April 1947 to the date of inspection, 21 May 1948, 104 children were either born in, or admitted to, the institution. Fourteen infant deaths were notified during the same period. Miss Litster calculated that this was a 13% infant mortality rate. The causes of death were given as gastroenteritis (six); marasmus/congenital debility (three); cerebral haemorrhage; cerebral tumour; haemolytic jaundice; cardiac failure and bronco-pneumonia. One woman died of eclampsia during this period. Miss Litster noted that many women admitted during the year were admitted 'practically in labour' and that some were 'verminous and suffering from scabies'. She concluded:

On the whole the health of the inmates of the Manor House continues good.
The food is plentiful and excellent. Beds and cots are comfortable.

- 20.57 The structural problems had continued. There were large cracks down the walls.

- 20.58 Miss Litster inspected again in January 1949. At the time of her visit, 131 women were living in the institution along with 160 children aged from new-born to three and a half years. The problem of older children remaining in the institution was again raised; a quarter of the children were over two years old. Again, Miss Litster urged that the local authorities make better efforts to find foster homes. She also raised concerns about a three-year-old boy whom she described as 'a mental defective, noisy, ill-tempered and unable to walk or talk' who could not be properly cared for in Castlepollard. In the year ending 21 January 1949, there were 123 live births (there were also six stillbirths) and a further five infants were admitted after birth. Four infant deaths were notified; the causes were given as gastroenteritis (two); congenital debility and haemolytic jaundice. Miss Litster noted that this represented an infant mortality rate of 3% and was a significant reduction from the previous year:

This is the lowest death rate yet in our special homes for mothers and babies and I think some recognition should be conveyed to the community and the doctor. The health of the children is on the whole, excellent, and they are well cared for.

Policy on mother and baby homes

- 20.59 In January 1949, the medical officer to Castlepollard, Dr Cullen, told the Department of Health that the continued failure of local authorities to board out children had led to serious overcrowding which he warned could result in epidemics of serious proportions. He said that the councils involved received a list of children maintained by them at the end of every quarter but failed to make any serious efforts to secure foster homes for them. He cautioned that local authorities must take a large share of the responsibility if children succumbed to infectious disease while resident in the home. Dr Cullen expressed his belief that all institutions catering for unmarried mothers were overcrowded with children who should have been boarded out and suggested that the department set up separate orphanages to cater for children aged between two and six years. He reasoned that women could then take their leave from mother and baby homes to take up employment and avoid the ‘discontentment’ attendant on ‘detaining’ women for two or more years while they waited for their children to be placed in foster homes.
- 20.60 Following Dr Cullen’s letter, the department gave some consideration to the system in operation in the three Sacred Heart mother and baby homes. Miss Litster pointed out that the retention of mothers for two years had been decided by the congregation in consultation with the Department of Local Government and Public Health and that all parties considered that this was the shortest period ‘within which any reformatory effect might be expected’. She further stated:
- The attitude of society in this country towards the unmarried mother is at the root of the idea of retention for a long period. Unmarried mothers here are persons to be punished. In the Homes a great deal of emphasis is placed upon penance and it is small wonder that girls come to look upon them as places of punishment. Any girl in these Homes speaks quite casually of ‘doing my term’. The result is that once the two year period has passed, continued detention is a cause of discontent. I suggest that mothers should be kept not longer than nine months after confinement. A more willing spirit amongst the inmates may be expected as a result.

- 20.61 Miss Litster pointed out other advantages to earlier discharges.
- Most of the mothers were domestic servants before admission and during their stay in the home have had opportunity of further training. There is at present a dearth of domestic servants and good wages are procurable. It is short-sighted policy to saddle a P.A. Authority longer than need be with the

upkeep of a woman who is capable of maintaining herself and of contributing to the maintenance of her child.

It would be good public policy to insist that the employment found for a discharged mother should be in this country for several reasons; to stem emigration; to help solve the problem of domestic labour; to keep her within reach. Another advantage which might accrue from earlier discharge would be greater readiness on the part of expectant mothers to seek admission to the maternity home at an earlier stage in pregnancy. There is a growing tendency to delay application for admission until confinement is almost due. The lack of pre-natal care can have nothing but bad results.

- 20.62 Miss Litster said that the Reverend Mothers of the three Sacred Heart homes were willing to agree on the shorter stay suggested but all emphasised the resultant problem of dealing with the children of discharged mothers. She then addressed Dr Cullen's suggestion about establishing homes where children could be maintained to the age of six or seven years.

On many occasions I have drawn attention to our need for homes for motherless babies. We have no such homes, except that now owned and conducted by the Irish Sisters of Charity at Temple Hill, Blackrock. To that home, of course, our "Public Assistance" babies have no right of admission. An orphanage for children up to 6 or 7 years old would not agree with our policy of keeping children as far as possible out of institutions. For this reason, homes to which babies might be transferred from the "mother & baby" homes at the age of 9 months, or earlier, should not be designed to keep children beyond an age when they might be boarded-out. To build and staff such nursery homes would prove a costly undertaking.

- 20.63 Instead she suggested that changes could be made to the arrangements in the three homes to allow for the establishment of a separate nursery for babies from nine months upwards. She pointed out that the space and equipment were already there. The consequences of such a change would include the employment of household staff as 'mothers left behind are found unwilling to care for the babies of discharged mothers'. She said that mothers who should have been discharged and who were willing to remain as domestic workers and nursery attendants should be paid. A higher capitation rate would have to be paid for children who were resident without their mothers. However, there would be savings to the local health authorities in that there would be no payments for the discharged mothers

and employed mothers could contribute to the cost of their children's maintenance.²⁶

- 20.64 Miss Litster said that she was unsure if the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts was willing to care for unaccompanied children who were in their care from birth but expressed her doubt that they would be willing to admit 'orphaned babies from outside' and considered it unwise to do so. She noted that the Sacred Heart Homes were already 'unwieldy' and that smaller units designed to house unaccompanied children were more desirable. There remained a problem of finding accommodation for 'illegitimate' children who were not born in mother and baby homes - children born in hospitals, county homes, maternity homes or at home. These children were being kept at home 'where they are not wanted' or placed at nurse for reward, or 'adopted' for a lump sum or brought to the Regina Coeli hostel. 'These are the babies whose deaths swell our infant mortality rate.'
- 20.65 She suggested that one or two of the 'better Convent Industrial Schools' might be asked to equip a nursery and provide staff trained in the care of infants and children. Miss Litster did not agree with Dr Cullen's suggestion that the department should set up standalone orphanages to house unaccompanied 'illegitimate' children. She cautioned against the move on the basis of the costs involved and the danger that such orphanages would become 'waiting rooms' for children destined for transfer to industrial schools, a move which she regarded as being against the departmental policy of keeping children out of institutions.
- 20.66 Miss Litster was strongly committed to keeping children out of institutional care which, in the case of older children in mother and baby homes, meant industrial schools. However, she thought that industrial schools were better than county homes. In November 1949, following requests to have 13 children aged between two and four years removed from Castlepollard, Westmeath county council sought permission from the Department of Health to transfer some children to an industrial school. The department refused the request and instructed the Westmeath council to re-double their efforts to secure foster homes for them. The Westmeath council replied stating that they were unable to secure suitable foster homes and that

²⁶ Miss Litster noted that her observations referred only to the three Sacred Heart homes. The other two homes in existence at the time – Pelletstown and Tuam - were directly controlled by the public assistance authorities. Mothers left these homes earlier than mothers in the extern homes and they were allowed leave their children in the homes. See Chapters 13 and 15.

Mullingar county home was also overcrowded with unaccompanied children. In further correspondence the Westmeath council sought permission from the department to transfer five boys aged between three and four years from Mullingar county home to St Joseph's Industrial School, Tralee.²⁷ When asked for her opinion, Miss Litster stated that she was reluctant to agree but conceded that, in the absence of suitable foster homes, the only way to get children out of Castlepollard was to make room for them in Mullingar county home. The department reluctantly agreed to the move on the proviso that the Westmeath council would continue to seek foster homes for all institutional children maintained by them.

The 1950s

- 20.67 The congregational council minutes for 1950 suggest that the Department of Health, through Miss Litster, had asked the congregation to consider setting up a home for 'unwanted children': presumably a reference to older children for whom it was proving difficult to find foster homes. It appears that the congregation could not come to a decision and the matter was left in abeyance. This was not the first time that the congregation refused an offer to set up a home in Ireland. In previous years the health authorities had lobbied the congregation to open mother and baby homes in Sligo and Wexford. On both occasions the congregation reluctantly agreed to the proposals and made efforts to source properties in both counties. On another occasion Miss Cruice, St Patrick's Guild, was anxious that the congregation would take over the work of an unidentified mother and baby home in Dublin (this was almost certainly St Gerard's - see Chapter 27). In this instance, the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr McQuaid, refused to allow the congregation to operate in his diocese. However, it seems clear from the congregational council minutes that the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts had no real interest in expanding its operations in Ireland and did not follow up on the proposals with any vigour.
- 20.68 During her inspection of Castlepollard in May 1950, Miss Litster noted that 28 children aged between two and four years were living there. Miss Litster commented that Meath county council was especially slow in finding foster homes. She also reported that all local authorities found it more difficult to procure foster

²⁷ See Ryan Commission: <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/rpt/01-09.php>

homes for boys than for girls. The Castlepollard institutional records confirm this: 20 of the 28 older children living in Castlepollard were boys.

- 20.69 In 1943, the departmental engineering inspector, Mr Humphreys, had reported that Castlepollard was suitable for the accommodation of 122 women and their babies. However, in May 1950 Miss Litster recorded that 142 women and 143 babies were living there. She noted that the Reverend Mother in Castlepollard had not been told about the assessment of maximum capacity and there was nothing in the agreement between the department and the congregation about maximum capacity. The issue was addressed immediately; a month later the department inspected Castlepollard again to establish occupancy and reported that adult occupancy was in line with its recommendations. However, the number of children living there exceeded the maximum occupancy number by 13; the problem, as always, was that alternative arrangements had not been made for the older children, some of whom were 'mentally defective'.
- 20.70 Miss Litster's 1950 inspection report stated that, in the period 21 January 1949 to 22 May 1950, 140 infants were born in Castlepollard and a further 40 were admitted after birth. Six infant deaths, and one child death, were recorded during this period; Miss Litster calculated that this was an infant mortality rate of 3%. Despite the concerns about overcrowding, she acknowledged that the mortality rates there were far lower than in other institutions.
- 20.71 The institution reported to the Department of Health that, on 31 March 1951, 122 women were living in Castlepollard. During the previous year 149 women had been admitted: 75% were maintained by local health authorities and 25% were private patients. Of the 162 women discharged during the year, 44 were discharged to employment. All but one of these women were public patients. Three women left the institution to marry, four were transferred to other unnamed institutions and a further seven were discharged to unspecified destinations. Most women were recorded as being discharged to parents or relatives.
- 20.72 When Miss Litster next inspected in November 1951, 113 women and 95 children were living in the home. She noted that six children aged three years and upwards should not have been there; five were accompanied by their mothers. Some women had lived in the institution for almost four years because alternative arrangements had not been made for their children. Miss Litster noted that four of

the older children were ‘mentally defective’ and the prospect of procuring foster homes for them was poor. One child, an unaccompanied five-year-old ‘mentally defective’ girl, whom Miss Litster had recorded in her previous four reports, had reportedly developed ‘a violent temper and vicious disposition’ and was deemed ‘a danger to younger children’. This child was born in Castlepollard to a private patient who had left the home and who repeatedly refused calls to have the child admitted to St Vincent’s Home, Cabra. The child’s mother was a native of County Laois and was paying £3 a month for the maintenance of her child. Laois council would not accept liability for the child’s maintenance in St Vincent’s Home. Miss Litster advised the Mother Superior that, failing successful negotiations between the child’s mother and Laois county council, the child should be transferred to the county home. In another instance, Miss Litster discovered that the NSPCC inspector for the area had proposed to bring a three-year-old boy, resident with his mother in Castlepollard, before the courts for committal to an industrial school. Miss Litster strongly opposed the move and demanded an explanation from Offaly county council as to why they were not utilising their powers under the *Public Assistance Act 1939* to provide for the child rather than bringing him before a court for committal to an institution.

- 20.73 In the period 1 April 1950 to 21 November 1951, ten infant deaths were notified in Castlepollard. All ten had been born in the home and were aged from new-born to seven months at the time of death. Causes of death were given as gastroenteritis (four); congenital heart disease/heart failure (four); prematurity/spina bifida and convulsions/cerebral haemorrhage. Miss Litster calculated that these deaths represented an infant mortality rate of around 5%. While acknowledging that this was relatively low, she noted that it represented the second increase in infant mortality in the home in two years.
- 20.74 In 1952 the Superior General of the congregation contacted the Department of Health proposing that unmarried women with more than one child should be allowed admittance to their homes. Traditionally, institutional care for unmarried women with more than one child was restricted to county homes. Sister Rosemonde had suggested that women and children already living in the Sacred Heart homes would be placed in Bessborough and Sean Ross and that single mothers and their children living in county homes could be transferred to Castlepollard. The department objected to the proposal for a number of reasons. The primary reason was that this would result in overcrowding in Bessborough and

Sean Ross. Another departmental objection to the proposal was concern that the removal of women from Westmeath to institutions in other districts would isolate them and would ensure that ‘family contacts would fail’. The third objection was that the fall in the numbers seeking admission would continue: the department was sceptical that the fall in admissions recorded in the 1950s represented ‘a sudden excess of virtue’.

- 20.75 The Department of Health made a different proposal to Sister Rosemonde, asking her, in consultation with the Superior General, to consider setting up a separate home to cater for unmarried women on their second or subsequent pregnancy in County Meath. Sister Rosemonde met a departmental delegation and the Meath county secretary²⁸ to discuss the proposal but decided against the move on a number of grounds; the initial cost of a new home would fall on the congregation ‘as they would not accept the running of an institution under the direct control of a local authority’; there would be difficulties getting suitable staff; and many single women on their second or subsequent pregnancy would be former residents of one of the Sacred Heart homes and might be reluctant to face re-admission to a home in the care of the same nuns ‘due to embarrassment’ or ‘fear of another lengthy stay’. Congregational council minutes for 1952 show that, at this juncture, the congregation was not prepared to undertake work with ‘second offenders’ even though it was in discussions with the Irish authorities about doing so. Due to increased pressure from the Department of Health, and some county managers, regarding the ‘pressing need’ to provide suitable institutional care for single women on their second or subsequent pregnancy the congregation approached Cardinal D’Alton, Archbishop of Armagh, to discuss the possibility of opening a home in Dundalk. However, following correspondence between Cardinal D’Alton and Louth County Council, the congregation withdrew the suggestion.
- 20.76 In May 1954, a Department of Health memorandum on services available to ‘unmarried mothers and illegitimate children’ gave an overview of Castlepollard. The memorandum stated that the institution had accommodation for 130 women and 130 children (which was more than the 122 deemed to be appropriate in 1943 - see above). It noted that Castlepollard had previously experienced severe overcrowding but produced figures for the years 1950-52 suggesting that average occupancy had declined considerably. The memorandum stated that, in 1953,

²⁸ Meath County Council was looking at establishing a mother and baby home at this time and did later set up Dunboyne – see Chapter 24.

average occupancy was 112 women and 96 children. In 1953, Castlepollard received £16,622 in local authority capitation payments and a further £305 from the Maternity and Child Welfare scheme. Total receipts for the year totalled £23,454: total expenditure was £23,539.

20.77 The memorandum noted that weekly capitation rates at Castlepollard in 1953 were £2 for mothers and £1 for children and were intended to cover the cost of all medicines, drugs and medical services provided by the institution. Dr Cullen remained as the visiting medical officer and emergency deliveries and caesarean sections were not undertaken in the institution, but transferred to the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin (Holles Street). Dr Cullen had asked local authorities to consider covering the cost of 'special drugs' such as aureomycin, streptomycin and procaine-penicillin outside of the ordinary maintenance charge. However, Miss Litster urged Dr Cullen not to press the matter and the suggestion was subsequently dropped. The Department of Health agreed that local authorities could pay for the use of drugs such as penicillin 'in certain instances'.

20.78 In April 1955 Miss Litster inspected Castlepollard. At the time of her visit, 111 women and 89 children were living there. She noted:

The general health of the occupants is excellent. The children especially are well cared for, well clothed, comfortable and well-fed. Good and plentiful play material is provided.

20.79 Miss Litster noted that the women had been admitted from almost every county in Ireland. She acknowledged that the original intention was that the Sacred Heart homes would be regional institutions but recognised that the admission of a large number of women from a small number of counties to any one institution was not conducive to residents seeking to maintain their anonymity. Miss Litster noted that nine children aged two years and over were also living there and described each of their circumstances:

- A two and a half year old girl. Mental defective. She is incapable of walking or talking, has no control over bodily functions, cannot feed herself. Arrangements have been put in train for her admission to St Vincent's Hospital, Cabra. The Health Authority might be asked to make an effort to expedite admission.
- A two year old boy. This boy may not prove suitable for boarding out. It is feared that he has an epileptic tendency.

- A three year old boy. This boy is a fine healthy child. Legal adoption was proposed for him but cannot be arranged because his mother is a patient in [...] mental hospital and her consent, even if procurable, would be invalid. I am informed that arrangements are being made for his admission to St Vincent's Junior Industrial School, Drogheda, and I suggest that the Health Authority might be asked to make efforts to obtain a good foster home for him at once instead of sending him to an industrial school.
- A two year old boy. A fine child of healthy appearance. However, he is making no effort to walk. It is possible he may prove to be sub-normal in mentality.
- A two year old girl. A lovely and healthy little girl. Arrangements have been made for her adoption in America and only the passport is being awaited.
- A two year old girl. This child is mentally defective. Arrangements are being made for her admission to the Home for mentally defectives in Lisnagry, Co Limerick. The Health Authority might be asked to make an effort to hasten her admission.
- A two year old boy. Awaiting passport for adoption in America.
- A two year old girl. A healthy and lovely little girl. Arrangements have been made for her adoption in America and the passport is being awaited.
- A two year old boy. A healthy little boy. Arrangements have been made for his adoption in America.

- 20.80 Miss Litster commented that children from Castlepollard were not sent to the USA for adoption until they reached the age of two; other institutions were sending them when they reached one.
- 20.81 She noted that a new dining room had been completed. It was 'admirably designed', airy, bright and attractive with tables seating four. The structural problems were continuing - there were patches of damp on the outer walls even though she was visiting after a prolonged period of dry weather.
- 20.82 In August 1956 the Minister for Health wrote to Bishop Kyne of Meath asking his advice on matters relating to the institutional treatment of unmarried mothers in Castlepollard. The minister was trying to reduce expenditure and was concerned about the length of time women and children were remaining in Castlepollard. The minister said that average annual cost of maintaining a woman and her child in

Castlepollard was £230 and £100, respectively. In his reply, Bishop Kyne said that he had no say in the administration of Castlepollard.

- 20.83 In July 1957, Miss Litster reported that 101 women and 81 children were living in Castlepollard. Because occupancy in Castlepollard was comparatively low at that point, she urged the department to contact health authorities in Wexford, Kilkenny and Limerick, where county homes had a number of mothers and children, with a view to transferring expectant women and single women and their children from those county homes to Castlepollard. Miss Litster stipulated that the health authorities should be asked to consider transferring women with one child and women with multiple children to Castlepollard.
- 20.84 In June 1958, the Department of Health inspector, Miss Reidy, inspected Castlepollard. At the time of her visit 103 women and 81 children were living there. She reported that accommodation for women was ‘clean, well-kept and adequately comfortable’ and was as follows: six seven-bed units and two six-bed units in the main building; the hospital had five six-bed units and one two-bed unit; the isolation unit had four two-bed units.
- 20.85 Miss Reidy reported that the children’s nurseries were ‘large, bright and airy’ and that the welfare and the wellbeing of both mothers and children was ‘excellent’. She noted that the children had a plentiful supply of ‘toys and playthings’ and a television had been installed.
- 20.86 Between Miss Litster’s 1955 inspection and Miss Reidy’s inspection, 332 women were admitted to Castlepollard: four were private patients and the remaining 328 were maintained by local authorities. Almost all the local authorities had residents there. Miss Reidy noted the recorded discharge pathways of 241 children in this period as follows: home with mother/relative (124); USA adoption (13); Irish adoption (seven); Scottish adoption (two); other adoption societies (72); boarded out (three); various children’s homes (eight); hospital (seven) industrial schools (five). Nine infant deaths were notified in this period; Miss Reidy noted that this was half the Sean Ross infant mortality rate.
- 20.87 In 1958, the Department of Health was reviewing the occupancy rates in the three Sacred Heart Homes - see Chapters 18 and 19. The conclusion was that two, rather than three, institutions would be sufficient to meet demand. The department

wrote to Bishop Kyne of Meath pointing out that Castlepollard was the smallest of the three and had the highest cost per patient. The proposal was to transfer women and children from Castlepollard to Sean Ross and Bessborough. Castlepollard would then be available to cater for ‘mentally defective children’. In reply, Bishop Kyne said that his diocese was not directly involved in the administration of Castlepollard and that the diocesan council of Meath would not object to the repurposing of the institution.

- 20.88 As the department gave further consideration to the future of the three Sacred Heart homes, the question of the unmarried mothers who were still using county homes arose. A memorandum, dated May 1958, noted that decreased occupancy in St Patrick’s Home, Navan Road (Pelletstown - see Chapter 13) could absorb some women who were using county homes. However, the memorandum concluded that in the event of Castlepollard’s closure, the only available accommodation for single women on their second or subsequent pregnancy would be in county homes. (This, of course, was incorrect because Dunboyne had been established for this purpose - see Chapter 24).
- 20.89 In March 1959, the Department of Health issued a circular letter and questionnaire to every health authority seeking up to date information on unmarried mothers and their children accommodated in county homes and similar health authority institutions. The returns showed that 204 unmarried mothers had been admitted to county homes in the year ending March 1959. On 30 September 1958 there were 94 unmarried mothers and 236 children in county homes. The children were not necessarily ‘illegitimate’; many were there because they had disabilities and no suitable institutional place was available; others were homeless. Information about the length of stay of mothers in county homes does not seem to have been collected but the department seemed to think that many stayed only for a month and the majority stayed for less than six months. The department’s commentary on the situation is revealing:

it appears that some health authorities do not endeavour to send unmarried mothers to the Special Homes; they only send them if requested to do so by or on behalf of the mothers. Most health authorities do, however, endeavour to send mothers to the Special Homes, generally first pregnancy cases, but it appears that quite a number of these refuse to go to the Special Homes because they believe they would be compelled to work very hard while there. This type of mother, often of the vagrant class, generally stays only a month

or so in the County Home and then leaves, taking her child with her; she is apparently not concerned very much about keeping her mishap secret. Health authorities generally have not been aware that second and subsequent pregnancy cases are being taken into the Special Homes so these cases are still accommodated in the County Homes as a rule. It appears that health authorities tend to keep subnormal unmarried mothers in the Homes for long periods - up to 3, 4 or 5 years - as they know that these girls would only get into trouble again as soon as they leave. The mothers of subnormal or handicapped children tend also to be kept in the Homes for long periods - the children are not suitable for adoption, boarding out or sending to industrial schools and health authorities tend to keep the mothers in the County Homes to look after the children until they can be admitted to suitable institutions.

- 20.90 A memorandum dated September 1959 shows that the department had begun to consider using Castlepollard as a home for women on their second or subsequent pregnancies. At this stage, it is clear that the homes were all accepting some women on their second or subsequent pregnancies but they would not accept the woman's other older child or children. It is also clear that the congregation did not favour establishing a home exclusively for these women.
- 20.91 This memorandum also dealt with the question of capitation rates. On 1 April 1956 capitation rates for all three homes had been fixed at £2 5s a week for mothers and £1 2s 6d for children. The department had anticipated that these rates would result in a revenue loss at Castlepollard but would result in a £1,500 surplus across all three homes. The department acknowledged that their expectation of a surplus was not realised, that a deficit totalling £7,000 was recorded in 1957 and that the congregation's financial situation had further deteriorated during 1958. The memorandum recognised that lower occupancy was the cause of the financial problems. Sister Rosemonde had called to the department to discuss the financial situation and had intimated that a plan to change Bessborough to a home for 'mental defectives' would be welcomed.

The 1960s

- 20.92 The Department of Health considered the capitation rates in January 1961. A briefing note at this time shows that the deficit of £7,000 in 1957 had increased to £25,000. The department considered that this accumulated deficit was largely the

fault of the authorities of the homes or their accountants as they had failed to present their annual accounts promptly and failed to draw the department's attention to any serious losses in running the homes. The department accepted that the revised capitation rates would have to cover the costs of running the homes and also deal with the deficit. The expected transfer of women and children from the Children's Home, Tuam (which was due to close - see Chapter 15) to Castlepollard and Sean Ross was a further consideration as this move was expected to increase income for both homes; the department expected that 17 women and 117 children would be re-located from Tuam.

- 20.93 In March 1961, the Department of Health notified authorities at the Sacred Heart homes that the capitation rates were being increased to £3 for each woman and £1 10s for each child and the increased rates would apply from 1 January 1961. The department also decided to discontinue the grants paid to the homes under the Maternity and Child Welfare scheme as they were not paid to other institutions; the three homes had been receiving a total of about £1,500 a year from this scheme. The revised capitation rates were to be considered 'all-inclusive' and would represent the total contribution to the homes from public funds. This meant that no extra payments would be made by health authorities for any medical services, blood-grouping or any similar tests provided for residents.
- 20.94 In June 1960, Miss Reidy inspected Castlepollard. There were 78 women and 79 children living there. She reported that the accommodation for women and children was 'clean and well-kept' and that the wellbeing of both was 'excellent'. In the period since her last inspection in June 1958, 337 women had been admitted: 302 were maintained by local health authorities and 35 were private patients. The children's exit pathways were recorded as follows: parent/relative (75); USA adoption (43); Irish adoption (16); other adoption societies (65); boarded out (nine); St Clare's Stamullen (12); industrial schools (two); and Crumlin Children's Hospital (four). There were two infant deaths in the period; the causes were congenital deformity and debility.
- 20.95 When Miss Reidy visited Castlepollard in March 1962, she recorded that, since her previous visit, 229 women had been admitted; 14 were private patients. Adoption was now the major exit pathway for children. A number of children continued to be described as going home with their mother or a relative but many of these children are very likely to have been subsequently placed for adoption.

- 20.96 There were six children in the institution aged between three and four; five of these had been transferred from the Children's Home, Tuam. There were 13 children without their mothers; nine of these had been transferred from Tuam; two were 'legitimate' children being maintained by Mayo county council and two were the children of mothers who were in 'special institutions'.²⁹
- 20.97 Miss Reidy concluded her report by stating that no infant deaths had occurred in Castlepollard during this two year period. However, the institutional records show that two infants born in Castlepollard during this period subsequently died in Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Crumlin.
- 20.98 Miss Reidy next inspected Castlepollard in August 1963. Her report shows that, in the period since her previous inspection, 100 women had been admitted and 77 women were living there on the date of her visit. Adoption continued to be the major exit pathway for children; two children were admitted to Nazareth House, Fahan at the request of their mothers. Two infant deaths were notified during this period representing an infant mortality rate of about 2%. Causes of death were given as congenital heart disease and congenital deformity.
- 20.99 In May 1964, the Department of Health examined the audited accounts of the Sacred Heart Homes and queried the increased running costs associated with Castlepollard. The congregation's auditors told the department that the annual salaries of nursing staff who were members of the congregation had increased from £50 to £200 during 1963. The auditors stated that there were 14 congregational nursing staff working at Castlepollard at that time. The auditors also advised that renewals and repairs at Castlepollard increased from £1,647 to £3,405 during 1963 and other increased expenditures were attributable to the erection of a new shed (£1,700) and the purchase of a new washing machine at a cost of £757.
- 20.100 Miss Reidy inspected Castlepollard again in April 1967. In the period since her previous inspection, in August 1963, 684 women had been admitted. There were 72 women and 41 children living there on the day of her visit. Adoption continued to be the most significant exit pathway for children and the problem of older children remaining in the institution was ending. When Miss Reidy inspected in

²⁹ It is not clear what is meant by this; it is most likely to be either mental hospitals or Magdalen laundries.

August 1968, there were 29 children in the home and all were less than six months old.

- 20.101 Miss Reidy's last inspection was in December 1969. At the time of her visit 43 mothers and 15 infants were living there. In the period since her previous inspection, 135 women had been admitted. All infant residents were less than six months old. Four women were living in the home without their children. Their children had been placed for adoption and the women were seeking employment. She noted that due to reduced occupancy, all residents were accommodated in the hospital block and the 'old Manor House' was unoccupied.
- 20.102 During her December 1969 inspection, Miss Reidy was told by Sister Rosemonde that talks had been going on with the Department of Health about the future of Castlepollard. Miss Reidy was clearly not impressed by the fact that she had not been informed by the Department of Health about the closure of Sean Ross as a mother and baby home - she found out only when she sent a client there after it had closed.

As you are aware, the inspection of Homes for Unmarried Mothers was assigned to me officially in August 1957. The reasons that it is administratively requisite that I should be kept informed regarding any proposed changes under consideration effecting either the running of the Homes or the reception of cases to them, are patently obvious.

- 20.103 She had not been informed of the talks about Castlepollard either: 'my first intimation also that the closing of the Home is almost imminent came from the Home Authority accidentally, and not, as logically one would expect, through the administrative channel'.

Closure of Castlepollard

- 20.104 In August 1969, the Superior General of the congregation, Sister Etheldreda, had told the Department of Health that the congregation would be discontinuing services for unmarried mothers at Castlepollard and it planned to dispose of the property. Sister Etheldreda said that she had informed the Bishop of Meath of the decision and, while he expressed his regret that such a decision had to be made, he was most understanding. She said that the property at Castlepollard was in excellent condition and asked if the department had an interest in buying the

estate. She said that any new work at Castlepollard would have to be undertaken by another congregation or lay group as she did not have Sisters available to continue the work there. In November 1969, Sister Rosemonde was asked to meet departmental officials to discuss the matter.

- 20.105 On 13 November 1969, Sister Rosemonde, Sister Assumpta, Castlepollard, and Sister Hildegarde, Bessborough, met Department of Health officials to discuss the proposed closure of Castlepollard. Sister Rosemonde told the meeting that Castlepollard had accommodation for 130 women but was ‘too big and too expensive to run’. She said that the capitation rate paid by health authorities ‘was not generous’ and that the home had incurred a substantial loss as a result. Sister Rosemonde also stated that the congregation had insufficient staff to run the home and found it impossible to employ nurses because of its remote location. She stated that ‘under the old system’ women stayed in the home for longer periods and undertook work while living there but that the average stay was now six to eight weeks. She told the meeting that there was no major hospital close to Castlepollard and that emergency cases were taken 60 miles to Dublin by road. This had been undertaken by a local man who was no longer available and she found it difficult to get emergency cases transferred to hospital, particularly at night. She said that the congregation did not want to ‘drop out’ of their work with unmarried mothers and intimated that they were considering opening a smaller home near an urban centre. However, efforts to establish such a home near Dublin had not met with Archbishop McQuaid’s approval because he considered that Pelletstown catered for Dublin’s needs. She said that women living in Castlepollard would be transferred to Bessborough.
- 20.106 A department official said that the decision to close Castlepollard was a matter for the congregation but thought it unwise to close it so soon after the closure of Sean Ross. He calculated that women living in both institutions could be accommodated in Bessborough with four beds to spare. However, it was brought to his attention that in March 1959, 188 women were living in both homes and that Bessborough had capacity to accommodate just 130 women. He expressed his concern that Bessborough did not have capacity to deal with every woman who sought admission to a Sacred Heart home and cautioned that the closure of Castlepollard ‘might create serious difficulties’ for the department. He also expressed concern that the closure of Castlepollard would leave the midlands and the west of Ireland without institutional services for unmarried mothers and their children. He asked

Sister Rosemonde if the Superior General would consider postponing the closure of Castlepollard for at least six months to give the department time to assess the ‘fall out’ from the closure of Sean Ross. He concluded by stating that the service provided by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts at Castlepollard was essential to the midlands and the west and urged the congregation to consider opening a smaller home near Galway or Sligo if plans to close Castlepollard were to proceed. The department wrote to the Superior General to tell her that the department was examining the possibility of using Castlepollard as a home for ‘mental defectives’ and thanked her for not pressing for the immediate discontinuance of services for unmarried mothers at the home.

- 20.107 In January 1971, Sister Rosemonde informed the Department of Health that the Superior General had decided to close Castlepollard and that the congregation would no longer admit maternity patients to the home. Sister Rosemonde advised the department that she hoped to have all resident children placed and all resident women discharged before the end of that month. The Longford/Meath/Westmeath Mental Hospital Board bought Castlepollard for £100,000. The Department of Health discussed the use of the £100,000 due to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary from the sale of Castlepollard and considered that, as a registered charity, the congregation had two options: to transfer the proceeds to the Department of Health for deposit to the Hospitals Trust Fund or to allow the congregation to use the proceeds to pay off their bills until the £100,000 was exhausted. Sister Etheldreda informed the department that the congregation would not object to the monies being spent on the provision of a new 50-bed unit to cater for ‘mentally handicapped’ girls at Sean Ross. The congregation has told the Commission that it paid £80,000 of the proceeds towards the unit in Sean Ross.
- 20.108 Concerns were expressed by the county medical officer for Westmeath about the closure and its effects on the availability of services for unmarried mothers in Westmeath. Bishop McCormack of Meath initially objected to the sale of Castlepollard as he considered that the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts should have, under canon law, sought permission from him to do so and protested that he had not been involved in discussions about the closure. (His predecessor had not objected - see above.) Furthermore, he told Sister Etheldreda that he had received representations expressing concerns about the consequences for the care of single expectant women. He said this continued to be an urgent pastoral problem

that could not be dealt with adequately by social services. Bishop McCormack subsequently agreed to the sale on condition that the purchasers would care for the ‘nun’s cemetery’ at Castlepollard. The matter of the ‘children’s cemetery’ did not arise during discussions.³⁰

Evidence of former 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 1960s

20.109 Resident A became pregnant at age 18 after being raped by her then boyfriend. When she was six months pregnant she told her parents. She said that the parish priest arranged for her to be admitted to Castlepollard and her parents drove her to Dublin and put her on a bus to Castlepollard. Her parents did not discuss any other options with her and ‘sent her away’. She went to the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society before she went to Castlepollard to make arrangements to have her baby adopted. Her mother wanted to keep the baby but her father would not allow it. Her father was afraid of what the neighbours would say and her pregnancy would have brought shame on the family.

20.110 She remembered entering Castlepollard for the first time:

There was a girl waiting at the gate for me, and took me up to the - and then when I went up to the office I got a pet name, my whole identity was taken away and I got a pet name. Then when any post came in for me it was opened before I got it, and when I was sending out letters they were read before I could seal the envelope. Then I was given a job, you were given jobs like I had to sluice the nappies and I had to take them down to the laundry and I had to collect the bread down there for to bring up for the supper. Some of the days I went down the nuns were carrying the little shoe boxes down, to bury the babies.

³⁰ Meath Diocesan Archives

- 20.111 Resident A told the Commission that she saw ‘about ten’ deceased babies being sent for burial in what appeared to be shoe boxes.³¹ The deceased infants were buried on site at Castlepollard.

I would like to see justice done like where the little babies were buried, you know why? Were they starved, why? I couldn't say they were really cruel or anything like, but I didn't like them burying the babies. I suppose they had to do something with them, but I didn't like that.

- 20.112 She told the Commission that there was a building on site at Castlepollard known as the ‘mattress room’ and the women were sent there to give birth if they were ‘screaming and shouting’. She had not seen this herself but was told about it by other women at recent meetings held at Castlepollard. She said that she was examined by a doctor and nurse about once a month. The doctor was in attendance when she went into labour and her baby was delivered by forceps. She said that the nuns forced her to breastfeed her baby for six weeks and she had a bad experience with it.

It was probably a good thing for the baby, but it wasn't good for me...I was made breast feed her and she was really and truly eating me. So, I said it to them, and they got me a shield and that didn't work, and they made me express then. They got me a pump and made me express. That turned me off breast feeding my children.

Resident B, Mother, mid 1960s

- 20.113 Resident B became pregnant at the age of 17. Her mother took her to her family doctor who suggested that she might move in with a couple in Cork until she had her baby. Her mother then brought her to see their parish priest who recommended that she would be admitted to Castlepollard. Her parents did not consult her or her partner on the decision: ‘It was Castlepollard or nowhere’. Her mother drove her to Castlepollard. Her parents signed all the paperwork at Castlepollard. She said that her mother signed her into Castlepollard under a different name to maintain her anonymity. Her mother was determined to conceal her pregnancy and was ‘in total denial’. She did not know if her parents paid for her maintenance in Castlepollard. She recalled:

So, I go to Castlepollard with my parents. I am brought in, introduced to one of the nuns, I can't remember her name. My parents - I was taken out of the

³¹ The institutional records show that no infant deaths occurred in Castlepollard during Resident A’s time there.

room and my parents had a chat with her. Then I was brought over to what they called the hospital. It was a separate building from the convent.

- 20.114 Resident B said that the ground floor of the maternity hospital housed about ten Down Syndrome women and their babies.³² She was put in an eight-bed ward for two months and then transferred to a two-bed ward for the duration of her stay. She was not allowed to use her real name and was given a house name. She said that women did not discuss their personal life with each other as they were 'too afraid'. She wore her own clothes but was given a brown nylon shop coat to wear over them. The women woke at 6am each morning for mass followed by breakfast. She recalled the daily routine as follows:

Get up, go to mass, have your breakfast, and then basically wash floors, clean windows, change beds; houseworky type things. Some of the girls worked in the laundry...It was more boring than hard... In the evening we would just sit around and read or talk or, you know, talk about nothing basically because we were all afraid to say 'my name is ...' type of thing, and you know, 'the guy that is the father of the baby is my boyfriend'. You know, you just didn't talk about your personal life.

- 20.115 She said that all the beds in Castlepollard were occupied during her time there and stated that some women were from Australia and England. She recalled:

Well they had English accents, so I presumed they were English. There were girls there that were from the country, but their parents didn't know that they were pregnant. They thought that they were working in England and say it is me, well I would write to my mum and give the letter to the nun not sealed, right. She would read it and if she didn't like anything in it they got a black marker and put a line through what they didn't like, and it was the same when we got post in, if they didn't like something they would censor it... The point I was going to make about the girls that their parents didn't know, that they thought they were working in England, they would write a normal letter home to their parents and say how well they are getting on and all this type of thing and they would send them to England to be posted back to Ireland.

- 20.116 Resident B did not remember if there was a television in Castlepollard but remembered hearing the radio in the dormitories during the day. The gates to the

³² The Commission has found no evidence of this.

institution were locked at all times and she had to seek permission to walk the grounds. She recalled that some of the nuns ‘were quite pleasant and some of them weren’t’. She said that she received no medical attention and ‘never saw a doctor’ during her time in Castlepollard. She told the Commission that a Down Syndrome girl delivered her baby and that there was no nun in attendance: ‘Just as I say this Down Syndrome girl standing beside me holding my hands and me screaming my lungs out’.

- 20.117 She said that the food served to women in Castlepollard was ‘horrendous’:

Breakfast would be a cereal and a cup of tea. Lunch would be a sandwich and dinner was normal dinner... You got what was on the plate and that was it. If you had a big appetite, then you were hungry... It was a harrowing experience. It was like being in jail basically; your freedom, your identity, the whole lot was taken away from you.

- 20.118 Resident B said that women were free to receive visitors and that her parents and her partner’s parents visited her. She said that, although there was no conversation with her parents about it, her child was going to be adopted and that was it. Her mother never spoke to her about her child. She subsequently married the father of her child and he refused to talk about their child.

- 20.119 Resident B told the Commission that she was in Castlepollard for nine months.³³ She said that her mother would have left her in Castlepollard ‘if she had her way’.

- 20.120 Three weeks after giving birth she was collected by her partner and they handed over the baby for adoption. She and her partner went to England and they subsequently married. The adoption papers were sent to her in England about two years later. She said:

I knew that she was, you know, that she was going to be adopted and I didn't really have the courage or the conviction to not sign them because at that stage I think I was about 20 living in a foreign country, two children, you know, and I didn't have the means to do anything about it either.

- 20.121 Resident B subsequently made contact with her daughter.

³³ The Castlepollard register records that Resident B was in Castlepollard for 18 weeks

Resident C, Mother, late 1960s

- 20.122 Resident C told the Commission that she came from a family of 12 children where there was 'a lot of religion'. She became pregnant aged 18 years in 1968. She did not tell her mother but her mother subsequently found out and was glad that Resident C was gone out of their neighbourhood so that she 'didn't bring shame on the family'. Resident C was put in contact with Fr Colleran, Catholic Protection and Rescue Society, who told her about Castlepollard. She told her friends that she got a job in the midlands and went to Castlepollard in November 1968:

I went in there. I remember the open armed statue at the door, it was facing the door, and I remember the girl who answered the door... So, she said, 'Mother is expecting you' and I was sitting down, and Mother came in. Again, in my head she was a very large presence. I stood up when she came in and she sat down, I remained standing, which was a very odd thing in a way... She told me that basically, I nearly have the words in my head because I never, I have vivid memories of certain aspects but not others, but she said how I'd been a really bad person and that I was there to make amends, and that I was lucky that they were taking me in, and that the only way I could get God to forgive me was by giving a good Christian family the child that I couldn't rear myself. So that was it... How my mind was, to be honest. I couldn't keep this baby.

- 20.123 Resident C said that she went into Castlepollard with the idea of having her baby adopted but that she did not know what that entailed.
- 20.124 She was brought upstairs in Castlepollard and was examined by 'a very nice nun', Sister Justine. She said that, because she did not have 'a huge bump', she was put on night duty and allowed to go into the local town on Sundays to attend mass. Her duties included feeding babies, making bottles and cleaning. When she became obviously pregnant she was put working in the home by day. She remembered:

I just have in my head this vision of very busy people; stairs being polished and you know all of that sort of stuff, but I don't have any memories of being so tired that I couldn't speak or anything like that, you know? I didn't find it, I mean I come from a family where we all helped out, we had a small little farm and we worked pretty hard tilling turnips and all that sort of thing, so I didn't mind work.

- 20.125 She had a bed in a dormitory. The women did not have much privacy. She recalled:

Again I used to share, well when I was younger I shared a bed with two sisters, a double bed, so having your own bed was actually not the worst thing that could happen to you, but it was all very strange and new... So again, personal hygiene was really important and not everybody realised that so you could sometimes be sharing with somebody whose personal hygiene was pretty awful.

- 20.126 She wore her own clothes in Castlepollard and a house coat. She remembered that women brought their clothes to the laundry and washed them themselves. They could watch television and she remembered watching 'Top of the Pops'. She said that she learned lots chatting to women who came from various parts of the country. She remembered that quite a few of the women were civil servants. They were not encouraged to talk to each other while working but that they had leisure time in the evening and the nuns operated a small shop on the premises:

And so, they sold, top of the list guess what? Cigarettes, cigarettes and matches top of the list. Toiletries, you could buy your toiletries and baby clothes. There was a lot of sort of almost competition about who would have the nicest clothes for their babies and things like that. What else? Obviously, it sold biscuits... So that, that was the shop. Like we would all be puffing our heads off in the whatever, it was some sort of a sitting room, you know, day room or whatever it was called. That would be an hour or something and then a bell would ring.

- 20.127 She said that her days in Castlepollard were 'very regimented' and, while food was not ample, the women were fed sufficiently. She remembered:

It was the very first time that I ever had potato salad. Like, it wasn't something that the farmer's wife made usually. I remember having potato salad, beetroot and tinned corned beef and it was a real novelty. Yes, it was, I was looking at it thinking it was very strange but, you know? So, yeah, you got things like that. So, no, I was never, I was never hungry.

- 20.128 Resident C told the Commission that her waters broke around six weeks before her baby was due and the nuns were convinced that she had done something to herself to bring on labour. This was the worst part of her time in Castlepollard when she was not believed. She was brought to the hospital and she had a long

and difficult labour. She was attended by a lay midwife and two helpers. A nun brought her son to her but told her that he would have to be transferred to hospital. Her baby remained in a children's hospital for almost two months. She did not have the opportunity to visit him there. When she recovered, she was put on night duty feeding babies:

Then I was put back on night duty because I was free, I was the one who was free, I didn't have a baby of my own to mind and I was, I think I was probably very good because I took an interest in all of the babies. My interest in babies has never waned. I love babies. Every baby I see I speak to. I fed all of the babies and I would have girls bribing me to feed their baby first, not quite bribing me, but you know what I mean?

- 20.129 She said that it was difficult to get updates about her baby and she found this very frustrating:

So, I didn't get weekly updates, or whatever, but when I would ask, she would say no he is not ready to come back yet, or whatever. So I continued almost like, like why am I here, I am a prisoner in my head, you know, and sort of thinking I might escape and go to Dublin and take him out of this hospital, you know I had all sorts of thoughts but obviously there was a number of things that were confining me and one of them was a lack of money. My mother never wrote to me or anything while I was there... the father of the child came once... But he didn't come again, and he didn't want a baby either. Like I didn't want him, and he didn't want either of us. So anyway, loads of times I really just wanted to run away but, in those days, you didn't get mother and payment, you know that? So that was, you know, I couldn't bring the baby home, end of story, and I didn't have any, anybody who said look I'll help you to mind your baby.

- 20.130 Resident C told the Commission that women stayed with their babies in Castlepollard until they were adopted:

If it took a year then you stayed a year. For some girls it took longer. There was a girl who had twins and they were finding it difficult to place twins, I think.

- 20.131 She remembered seeing some older children in Castlepollard during her time there. She also remembered some women who worked in the home and were known as 'lifers'. She thinks that these women had had children in Castlepollard

but were mentally incapacitated to some degree. She also remembered that some women in Castlepollard were there on their second pregnancies and that they 'got a terrible hard time':

Then there was also a girl arrived one day and I remember it so well. She was slim, beautiful; her hair was beautifully done, etc... She came in, she was there two days, her baby was born and three days later her baby was adopted, and she had her own room. I wondered afterwards, you know, whose daughter was she because obviously she was somebody that the nuns knew? She could have been a politician's daughter, who knows but there was that special treatment.

- 20.132 She remembered that the priest was treated very well when he came to say mass at Castlepollard on Sundays. She stated that everything had to be perfect for his visit and that he was given his breakfast after mass:

He got rashers and sausages and the whole lot. We didn't get any of those but if you happened to be in the kitchen when you were cooking them you might have got a little bit. So, it was probably of its time that era when everybody bowed down to the clergy and people had disdain. Like you know you were lower than, it is a very hard thing when you are made to feel that. You know people say you can only be made to feel it if you allow it but I certainly wasn't self-aware or well developed in those days; I didn't have any skills really so I felt myself like a really bad person.

- 20.133 She said that babies in Castlepollard were 'stuffed with porridge and thick rice and rusks so that they would fatten up' and look healthy for prospective foster parents. She remembered well-dressed couples visiting Castlepollard and presumed that they were prospective adoptive parents:

I kept thinking maybe they are going to take my baby. I would be looking at people. Then I was told, I was told one, I think it was a Wednesday that you are going to Dublin tomorrow, your baby is being adopted tomorrow. Now I am sure I signed papers, but I have no recollection of signing papers. It is possibly something that I did but it doesn't stand out for me. I don't have this memory of signing away my baby... But I obviously did, I'm sure I did otherwise it wouldn't have happened. I don't know if I knew the full implication of it, but I did, I knew that I had no choice I think, so that was it.

- 20.134 The witness told the Commission that that she was driven by car to the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society with her baby and accompanied by a nun from Castlepollard. She stated that she had all her belongings with her in the car. She remembered:

I was put in a room up the top of the house with him and then they brought me in, well it was a nun brought me in a hot bottle and told me to feed him for the last time, so I did. Then she just came in and took him. So I had to stay in the room, I was trying to look out the window to see would I see people going out with him or would I follow them, you know, all this sort of thoughts? Anyway I had to stay for 30 minutes and then no talk, nothing, just 'you may go now'...So I had to put on the brave face and smile and look like life was very good and I'd just come from my job. So, I did that, I suppose I did that, and I did it for years, I was able to, you push it all down there somewhere... So, I didn't ever discuss him. I didn't forget him.

- 20.135 She met her son 30 years later in the room in which she had given him up for adoption. She said that she had a happy reunion with him and he was now part of her family. Reflecting on her time in Castlepollard, she said:

I wouldn't, like I would never sort of condemn Castlepollard. I feel that at the time I was what was considered 'in trouble', that was what was on offer. It was a penance, you know? They weren't enlightened about people's feelings... They were God's people and, you know we had, we did have respect for them, there is no doubt about it, and you had fear, you know you did have fear. Probably all of us down there our biggest fear was that somebody would find out about us. Like that was probably one of the biggest fears.

Resident D, Child, born mid 1940s

- 20.136 Resident D believes that his mother was admitted to Castlepollard in 1944. He has a photograph of her in Castlepollard and she was 'smiling and seemed quite happy'. She stayed with him in Castlepollard for two years and then he spent a further four years there. His mother told him that she was working to contribute towards his maintenance in the home. He suspects that his mother was trying to prevent him from being boarded out but he was subsequently discharged to Tullamore County Home. He told the Commission about his own research into mother and baby homes but said that he had no memory of his time in Castlepollard and that his mother had not spoken much about her time there.

Resident E, Child, born mid 1960s

- 20.137 Resident E told the Commission that he suspects that his mother was admitted to Castlepollard as a private patient as she came from a wealthy family. His mother was driven to Castlepollard by her father who 'left her there'. He was taken from his mother as soon as he was born and sent to a nursery. His mother did not see him for 13 days. He was then transferred to another mother and baby home with his mother. His mother was collected from there by her father and he was left unaccompanied. He was collected by his adoptive parents three days later. He has never met his birth mother but spoke to her on the phone once for 50 minutes. He stated that his mother had no memory of the time between giving birth and leaving him in the second mother and baby home. Not surprisingly, he has no memory of either institution.

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 F, Mother, early 1960s

- 20.138 Resident F was collected from her home by a priest who drove her to Castlepollard when she was 14 years old. She said that she did not know that she was pregnant. She was given a 'house name' but she refused to acknowledge it:

I was told 'from now on you answer to the name [...]' . I did not respond to being called [...] because my name is [...]. I got my ear pulled or a thump on the back or my hair pulled by the nuns when I did not respond to being called [...]

...Their behaviour and aggression towards me was vicious and spiteful...They would give me a vicious knock, hit or dig. The nuns were unkind, hostile, spiteful and mean.

- 20.139 She said that she was subjected to beatings by the nuns:

I was beaten by the nuns with a stick. They would beat me all over, on my head, my arms, my legs, anywhere. I don't recall what I did to get beaten so badly. I had massive welts and bruises all over me. I saw other girls get

beaten with sticks and saw their welts and bruises. No one visited so no one knew what they did to us. You got beaten by sticks or by their hands; across your face, your head, hands, arms, legs or torso.

20.140 She said that the nuns made her unblock toilets with her bare hands. This used to make her physically sick and she could not get rid of the putrid smell. She stated that 'sometimes a nun was kind' and would give her a bar of scented soap after unblocking the toilets.

20.141 She said that the sanitary towels given to women in Castlepollard were made from towelling:

We were given six towels each and they had to last for the whole of your period. They were made of towelling, but they were like gold dust. They would be stolen by the other girls if you did not hide them well. The towels were hard and smelly. You had to wash them by hand before they were taken away and boil washed in the laundry. You washed what you had out to use again but they were awful things to use...We had to deal with periods every month...I dreaded my periods and I think every girl did.

20.142 She said that the 'older girls' in Castlepollard were 'malicious and nasty' and physically assaulted and threatened her. She said that she was hit and smacked across the face by the older girls and that the nuns did nothing about it. She stated that some of the girls would take her clothes and underwear and if she complained to the nuns, they would physically assault her.

20.143 She said that she had a difficult pregnancy and was put on bed rest for six months. She was transferred to a hospital in Dublin to give birth and then returned to Castlepollard with her baby. She stated that she was not allowed enough time to recover and was made to go back to work in the home even though she could not walk on her own. She said that the nuns had no concern about her and did not care about her welfare.

20.144 She said that the nuns were unsympathetic to women if they were sick or ill:

I had in-growing toenails and never had treatment for them while I was at Castlepollard. No one did anything if you were ill, the nuns did nothing, you were left to deal with pain...Some girls would get hurt by doing their jobs, some would get hurt in the laundry room by machinery or down on the farm.

The nuns would bandage the girls; no one was sent to the hospital or seen by doctors. The same could be said about the girls in labour, the nuns delivered the babies...

- 20.145 She said that she was put in charge of one of the dormitories:

Working in the dormitories was a better job than most. I think there were 12 beds and one chest of drawers for all of us in our room. Our clothes were laid out every two days or so. Everyone had their names on their clothes. Our underwear had to last two to three days before they were changed. There was no storage in the room for clothes...When important people came to Castlepollard I had to change the beds and put these new bedspreads on beds and put the old ones in the chest of drawers. Once they were gone the old canopies came out.

- 20.146 She said that each bed had a pillow, blanket and sheets. The bedspreads were taken off the beds at night and women were not allowed to use them to stay warm. The dormitories had radiators but that they were not left on long enough to heat the rooms: 'You went to bed cold and you stayed cold all night and you woke up cold'.

- 20.147 She said that the daily routine in Castlepollard began at 5am when women went to mass and then had breakfast. They then went to work in the laundry, ironing, cleaning, tending to the dormitories and working on the farm. The women did all the work while the nuns supervised:

They would beat you or wallop you if they thought you did not work hard enough or do it right. They would make you do it again. They were very cruel and blamed us for them being in the convent. They are the cruellest people under the sun and the harshest on the planet.

- 20.148 Breakfast at 7am was porridge with milk and sugar on top. Lunch was between 1-2 pm and consisted of bread with jam or cheese, with ham every so often. She said that dinner was at 5pm and that it was 'a proper dinner' with meat and vegetables:

We had to line up and our food was served by other girls. You wouldn't and couldn't line up for seconds. We would have a pudding, normally rice or semolina and every so often apple pie and custard. We were always hungry.

20.149 The women were allowed to watch television in the evenings and that they were in bed by 9 pm. The women washed every day in a sink and they had toothbrushes and toothpaste. She said that she hid her toiletries because other women would try to steal them.

20.150 She said that the nurseries in Castlepollard were well-run and the children were treated well. Sister Angelina was in charge of the babies and she was a lovely lady:

The children had plenty of clothes, nappies and plenty of food. The children were immaculate. You could pick out outfits for your child to wear. The children had plenty of food. Not many babies were breast fed, mostly bottle fed, I think because the children were moved on and adopted. There were children there as old as 5-6 who were never adopted.

20.151 She said that she was upset when her baby was taken for adoption and the nuns showed her no sympathy. She said that at some stage she had signed her name on a document but she did not know what it was. She believes that these were documents relating to the adoption. She remained in Castlepollard for six weeks after the adoption and was then taken to a hospital in Dublin where she worked in the kitchen and lived onsite.

Resident G, Mother, early 1960s

20.152 Resident G became pregnant at the age of 19. Her mother discovered that she was pregnant and sent her to Castlepollard. She had no say in this decision. When she entered Castlepollard, she was given a 'house name' and a uniform. She was not made to work in the home as she was heavily pregnant and had swollen ankles. Her labour was uncomplicated and one of the nuns helped to deliver her baby. She was not given any pain medication. She found the birth to be a traumatic experience as she was alone and did not have any family member with her and she was not shown any compassion by the nun.

20.153 She was sent to work in the laundry at Castlepollard a few days after giving birth:

I worked six or seven days a week from early morning until evening. The working conditions were very difficult due to the long hours and the heat and I felt constantly exhausted...The nuns told us that we had to work to pay for the cost of our upkeep in the home.

- 20.154 She bathed and fed her baby every day but she was not allowed to spend any great amount of time with her child. She feels that this was a conscious effort by the nuns to prevent mothers and children from bonding. She said her baby was kept in a play pen all day and that had impeded his physical development. She said that the mothers were only given limited information about their babies.
- 20.155 She said that, while she was not afraid of physical abuse at Castlepollard, the nuns subjected her to emotional abuse. She said that she felt she was not able to complain of her treatment as the nuns would not have listened. She said that this contributed to 'the culture of fear' in the institution.
- 20.156 She said that living conditions in Castlepollard were 'basic' and that the nuns enjoyed a 'better lifestyle'. Women had little freedom and there were no opportunities for recreation, education and exercise. The nuns read all her incoming and outgoing letters and this prevented her from forming meaningful relationships with anyone outside Castlepollard:
- It was very lonely and depressing living in Castlepollard. I felt that I was locked away for all that time, despite the fact that I had not committed a crime.
- 20.157 She said that she signed documents relating to her baby's adoption under duress. She said that she was never informed of her rights and was not offered any advice. She said that the nuns reduced the amount of time that she got to spend with her baby after signing the adoption papers. She felt that this was to reduce any chance of bonding. Her baby was adopted by an American couple when three months old:
- The night before [my baby's] adoption, I was given clothes to dress him in and the nuns had given him a teddy bear and a prayer book. The next morning, I woke up early to bathe and dress him. As I was trying to say goodbye, a nun entered the room and removed him from my arms stating that he had to go now...I later learned that he was taken to Shannon airport with a nurse and flew to America.
- 20.158 She said that she subsequently learned that the adoptive parents handed money over to the nuns at Castlepollard and that 'payments continued for a number of years'.³⁴

³⁴ The witness did not provide any evidence to substantiate this statement.

I was never informed of this fact by the nuns and I was shocked by the reality. I felt as if my son had been sold.

- 20.159 She remained in Castlepollard for a month after her baby was adopted.

Resident H, Mother, late 1960s

- 20.160 Resident H became pregnant, aged 20, as a result of rape. She subsequently contacted the man who promised to support her but then disappeared. She then went to see this man's parish priest and told him her story. She said that the priest sexually assaulted her in his car. Her parish priest arranged for her to be admitted to Castlepollard. She said that going to Castlepollard was initially a relief for her as she was having so much trouble at home. She was given a 'house name' and 'a big floral smock' to wear. Her days in Castlepollard were 'long and boring' and the women were not allowed to speak to each other. She said that the medical officer examined her every week:

I hated him; he was so rough with really big hands. He used to examine me internally from the back passage and I was sore for ages after. I went into labour ... and was still there two days later. I was given nothing to eat in case I was sick...Eventually, [three days later] I was put in the main labour ward and they sent for [the medical officer]. He had a face like thunder as he was so annoyed that he had to come in. He and Sister Aiden put me to sleep and I had to have a forceps delivery. He woke me up and stitched me in cold blood with not even a local anaesthetic. I will never forget the pain. I later found out that he had cut right through my rectum and I had six stitches. I couldn't go to the toilet properly for years after that.

- 20.161 She said that she was unable to walk after her labour as 'they had damaged a nerve in my right leg'. She said that no one was allowed to breastfeed in Castlepollard and that women had to express their milk and feed their babies with a spoon:

I really wanted to feed my baby myself but instead I couldn't see her. The other girls kept saying how beautiful she was. I wasn't allowed out of the bed and didn't see her until after Christmas. All the time I was expressing, and she was being fed off a spoon. I had engorged breasts with milk lumps in my shoulders and upper arms. I was in so much pain...I was in agony...They wrapped me in tight bandages to relieve me...I was forced to stay in bed for 21 days.

- 20.162 She said that when she held her baby for the first time, she was determined to keep her. She was sent to work in the laundry when her baby was six weeks old:

It was a horrible place and the smell hit you each morning. Filthy nappies and sanitary towels called 'rabbits' were washed in huge washing machines. We could only see the babies at feeding time when you expressed your milk and fed them with a spoon. All the time we were feeding we had to recite the rosary out loud and so couldn't talk to our babies. Once they were fed, we changed their nappies and went back to work.

- 20.163 Her foster mother told her that she could bring her baby home and keep her. The witness 'jumped at the idea' as she did not want to put her baby up for adoption. She said that the nuns did not approve of the move as she did not have the means to support herself and her child. Life with her foster mother was difficult and she struggled with being a first time mother. She said that she used to get 'incredibly upset' and had no one to turn to for help or advice. After six months, she and her baby were re-admitted to Castlepollard. She said that the nuns were very persuasive, and she agreed to put her baby up for adoption. She realised that she could not work and look after her baby at the same time and realised that she had very little to offer her baby:

The nuns painted a wonderful picture of the life she would have in the USA and how could I deny her that...I don't know where I got the strength to make the decision as they suggested but I did so and I agreed to return to Castlepollard...I dreaded going back there and I didn't know how I would be received.

- 20.164 She said that she and her baby were put in isolation for two weeks and were brought food by one of the women. When they were released from isolation she saw her baby only for short periods each day and although she never saw any evidence of it, she wondered if her baby was given 'any injections'.

- 20.165 She said that she worked in the front hall of the home during this period. On one occasion she was physically attacked by one of the nuns which left her with 'scratches on her arms and covered in flour'. This nun also verbally abused her and told her that all she was good for was 'lying under men'. Another nun asked her not to tell the Reverend Mother about this:

Living in Castlepollard was like living in a prison. I couldn't leave while I was there but, even if I could have done, I had nowhere to go...We had to work all

the time...There was the odd argument or fight when one of the girls didn't follow the rules but I didn't get involved in any of that and tried to stay out of trouble. A lot of it I don't remember.

- 20.166 The witness said that the women lived in the convent. There was no heating, although she was allowed a hot water bottle, and the building was freezing in the winter. She slept in a ten-bed dormitory and was allowed to bathe once a week for 20 minutes. She said that 'there was no medical care or attention, not even an aspirin'. She described the food in Castlepollard as 'adequate' with porridge for breakfast; soup and bread for lunch; and stew with vegetables followed by pudding for dinner. She did not know if the nuns ate the same food as the women. There were no opportunities for education at Castlepollard but they had recreation time for an hour every evening when they watched television.
- 20.167 Her child was adopted by an American couple when she was two years old. She was then free to leave Castlepollard but had nowhere to go. She contacted her birth mother who arranged for her to live with her aunt in the UK. She was subsequently contacted by her daughter and that they now have a wonderful relationship.

Children born in Castlepollard in the 1960s

- 20.168 Seven people born in Castlepollard provided affidavits. They had no recollection of their time there. One described his time in an industrial school. A number described their experiences of adoption.
- 20.169 Some provided anecdotal evidence about their mothers' experiences. One man who was born in the mid-1960s said that his mother told him that the treatment was terrible and inhumane:

She said she was made feel like a criminal for having a baby and was constantly made to feel guilty...She said she would never be able to publicly acknowledge my existence because of the shame she felt and she was terrified that anyone would ever find out about it...My birth mother said that she did not suffer any beatings at the hands of the nuns, but she spent the majority of the day on her hands and knees scrubbing stone floors. She told me it was a very emotionally traumatic time and that it impacted her mental health severely.

Evidence of former staff heard before the Commission of Investigation

Sister Sheila Buckley, Castlepollard, 1968-71.

20.170 Sister Sheila told the Commission that she worked as a midwife in Castlepollard from 1968 to 1971. Two other midwives assisted her. Dr Cullen, an obstetrician, was medical officer to the home at that time. He visited every Tuesday to examine the women living there. He did not attend at normal deliveries but did so if there was a complication, if there was foetal distress or if the mother was unable to deliver. Sister Rosemonde was Mother Superior at Castlepollard during her time there.

20.171 The nearest maternity hospital to Castlepollard was the Coombe Hospital, Dublin, which was a two hour drive away. The home did not have an ambulance to transport emergency cases. She said that there was 'great cooperation' between Castlepollard and the Coombe who were always willing to take women from Castlepollard when necessary. Sister Sheila stated that societal attitudes to single motherhood were changing at that time:

They were inclined to go more into the hospitals to have their babies and then they would be transferred from the hospital to us until such time as the mother made up her mind whether she wanted the adoption or whether she would keep the baby, so they were given that time.

20.172 Sister Sheila said that it was still policy that women would take a 'house name' in Castlepollard in the late 1960s:

Well the girls were offered this name and they all wanted to take names when they came in and it was just because of confidentiality really, you know. If anybody didn't know that they were there and they rang up phoning, well if they didn't know the house name you knew you could decline and not always give out the information.

20.173 Sister Sheila stated that the maternity hospital at Castlepollard was a modern well-equipped unit and that it was 'quite a nice place to work'. With regard to the general atmosphere in the institution she stated:

It was quite pleasant. There was the odd disagreement I suppose between them but that's always, they were all right the next day, an odd grumble here and there.

20.174 Sister Sheila stated that Sister Rosemonde interviewed every woman on her admission to the maternity hospital at Castlepollard. She stated that the purpose of the interviews was to find out who they were, whether they intended to keep their babies and to ascertain if any family members were aware that they were in the home.

20.175 She said that there were typically ten to twelve babies to be cared for in the neonatal nursery at any one time. She and a nurse looked after the babies and were helped by some of the young mothers waiting to have their babies. She said that it was a popular job for some of the women. She said that mothers went to the nursery to feed their own children. With regard to breastfeeding, Sister Sheila stated:

Well they would feed if they wanted to but very few of them did want to breastfeed so they used to express the milk and then that was boiled and given to the.., put in the bottles and given to the babies...some of them went home a bit early, you know, if they didn't make a decision about the baby and they wanted the time to think, they didn't want to be breastfeeding and then going home. So, it was to keep their breasts from getting engorged and all that kind of thing.

20.176 Sister Sheila explained that if a woman was undecided on whether to put her child up for adoption, she would leave the baby in Castlepollard while making her decision. She said that, while some may have decided to take the baby home, most women were advised by their families to have their babies adopted. She said that adoptions from Castlepollard were managed by Fr Regan of St Clare's Adoption Society, Stamullen, in conjunction with Sister Rosemonde. Sister Sheila said that she sometimes brought infants from Castlepollard to Bessborough to be adopted through the Sacred Heart Adoption Society. She stated that on some occasions, but not always, foster parents waiting at Bessborough would give her a donation of £10 to be given to Sister Rosemonde:

If I took a baby to the parlour and if somebody would put a note in my hand, that's the only thing that I am aware of a donation. They might say, to help

you with the petrol, Sister, or something they might say, something like that, you know.

- 20.177 Sister Sheila said that no infant deaths occurred in her nursery during her time at Castlepollard. However, she said that infants who died in the home were buried in an onsite burial ground. She moved to Bessborough when Castlepollard closed in 1971.