

## Chapter 26: The Castle

### Introduction

- 26.1 The Castle, Newtowncunningham, Co Donegal opened in 1982 and closed in 2006. It was not a traditional mother and baby home. It was a supported hostel for women and their children which aimed to give time to the women to make decisions about their futures and that of their babies. Between 1997 and 2000, the Castle building was not used as a mother and baby hostel but as a children's home and for access visits by fostered children to their mothers (a Young Person's Residential Unit). During this time, the mother and baby hostel was in a house in Letterkenny but moved back to the Castle in 2000.

### Sources

#### Institutional records

- 26.2 At the time of the establishment of this Commission the records of the Castle were held by St Mura's Adoption Society, Pastoral Centre, Letterkenny. The Commission collected the records from St Mura's in August 2015, photocopied them and returned the originals to St Mura's. In 2018, St Mura's handed over the originals to the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA). The main records are as follows:

- **Admission records:** The admission records contain various details about the residents including when they arrived and when they left but generally do not systematically include the date of birth or age of the mothers. The places and dates of birth of the babies are generally recorded. The exit pathways of the mothers and the babies are recorded in some cases.
- **The Castle Diaries:** From 18 June 1984, detailed diaries were kept recording what happened each day. The entries were handwritten by the staff. They provide a comprehensive account of the day to day activities in the Castle including routine housekeeping issues and problems with maintenance. They reveal a great deal about the personalities and circumstances of the women (including their ages in some cases), the attitudes of the staff and the role of the social workers and other health board staff.

Between the admission records and the Castle Diaries, it is possible to get a quite detailed picture of the women's lives, whether they were school going or had a job; their family relationships, for example, whether the

woman's parents were aware of the pregnancy, whether they were supportive; and relationships with the fathers of the children. The Commission interviewed one of the longest serving staff members of the Castle. She worked there from 1986 and was regarded as a 'house mother'.

- **Financial records:** There is some limited financial information for the period January 1997 - October 1990 including some information about the payments which the women made towards their stay. The major financial input came from the North Western Health Board whose records are not available.
- **Work records:** These mainly consist of rotas and lists of staff; the records are for the period July 1984 - December 2000.

### Other records

26.3 The North Western Health Board (NWHB) was the principal financial backer of the Castle and was very closely involved with its running. It employed the staff who worked there. Other staff including social workers and community welfare officers as well as maintenance staff were frequent visitors. The HSE (the successor to the NWHB) has been unable to provide the Commission with any records of this involvement. A former senior social worker with the NWHB gave evidence to the Commission about her involvement with the Castle during the 1980s.

26.4 The Department of Health does not seem to have had any involvement.

### Background

26.5 A document compiled by the management committee of the Castle in 1993 states that, following discussions between the North Western Health Board (NWHB)<sup>1</sup> and the Derry Diocesan Child Welfare Society about the need for a hostel service for unmarried mothers and their babies in the north-west area, the NWHB bought the Castle in 1978 for £48,000. The total cost after fees and repairs was expected to be £65,000. The Catholic dioceses of Raphoe and Derry each contributed £10,000 to the capital cost. A management committee was established to run the hostel. It had representatives from each diocese and three NWHB representatives - the Director of Community Care (who was the chair), the Senior Social Worker and the Superintendent Public Health Nurse.

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<sup>1</sup> The North Western Health Board covered the counties of Donegal, Leitrim and Sligo.

- 26.6 According to this document, the project ran into a number of difficulties. Extensive repairs to the roof and additional changes to the interior cost a further £15,000 and delayed the opening. It had been hoped that there would be a formal agreement between the NWHB and the Western Health and Social Services Board (Northern Ireland) about admissions to the Castle from Northern Ireland but the Northern Ireland board could not formally co-operate with this. There were then difficulties in recruiting a suitable person to run the hostel. The position of hostel supervisor was advertised in July 1979.<sup>2</sup> This stated that the NWHB was shortly going to open a hostel for unmarried mothers to cater for a maximum of ten mothers and their babies. The successful candidate was required to be a qualified nurse and midwife. 'The successful applicant will be a good organiser and administrator with the ability to foster and maintain a homely atmosphere in the Hostel. She would be required to work a 40 hour, five day week but 'will deal with important or urgent matters occurring outside these house as necessary'. The salary range was £3,660 to £4,623 with a self-contained flat provided free of charge. The Commission does not know what the recruitment difficulties were but, in December 1981, it was decided to appoint a housekeeper rather than a midwife. The Castle officially opened on 7 December 1982 and the first resident arrived that day.
- 26.7 The NWHB *Annual Report 1982* recorded that 'an important additional resource in 1982 was the opening of the Mother and Baby Hostel in the Castle, Newtowncunningham for pregnant women who are unable to stay at home for the duration of their pregnancy'. It went on to say that 'Referral to the Castle involves follow-up support and services by the social work department to a greater degree than has been possible in the past when mothers were referred to homes and places as far away as Dunboyne and Dublin'. This suggests that the NWHB intended it to be mainly for women from its area but, in practice, many of the residents came from other parts of the country.

### **Governance**

- 26.8 As already stated, the hostel was run by a management committee which had representatives from the NWHB and the dioceses of Raphoe and Derry. The management committee met once a month in the Castle. The Commission has not seen any minutes of these meetings but there are a number of references to them and decisions made at them in the Castle diaries. In practice, it seems that overall

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<sup>2</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 22 July 1979.

policy was set by this committee and the day to day management was largely in the hands of the NWHB. The house mother who was interviewed by the Commission said that there was a 'heavy input' from the social work department in the diocese of Derry as well as from the senior social worker in the NWHB. She said that a priest from Derry attended the monthly meetings as did the local curate from Newtowncunningham (which is in the Raphoe diocese).

- 26.9 The NWHB senior social worker who gave evidence to the Commission, and who was herself on the management committee, said that there were social workers from the dioceses and from CURA on the committee. She said that interviews for Castle staff were conducted by interview panels with representatives from the health board and the dioceses. She said that there were some disagreements between the health board approach and that of the diocesan representatives. She said that 'there was an assumption that whatever the church wanted ruled'. She said that the NWHB had plans to 'arrange courses in health education and nutrition and women's health and things like this, and immediately alarm bells rang'. She was told, in no uncertain terms, that talking about women's health would be cutting across or going against Catholic teaching. The health board made it clear that it intended to provide this for the women it referred.

### **The women**

- 26.10 Between 1982 and 1998 (the years covered by the Commission's remit), a total of 325 women entered the Castle. Seven of these are recorded as not being pregnant.<sup>3</sup> They were accompanied on entry by 64 children. (In the period 1999-2006, a further 70 women entered the Castle; they were accompanied by 30 children.) The vast majority were referred by either a health board or CURA; small numbers were referred by adoption societies and voluntary agencies.
- 26.11 There was a general policy of not accepting women until they were at least six months pregnant but exceptions were made for particular circumstances. There was also a general policy that women could remain for six weeks after the birth even if the baby was not with them. Women rarely stayed that long but, again, this policy was not rigidly applied and a few women were allowed stay longer because of their particular circumstances. In one case, the mother stayed for longer because her baby was in Letterkenny hospital.

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<sup>3</sup> They were mainly young girls whose foster arrangements had broken down.

- 26.12 The records of admissions start in December 1982; six women entered in that month. All were referred by CURA. One baby was born in 1982 and the other five births took place in 1983.
- 26.13 The NWHB *Annual Report 1983* noted that there were 28 women in the home in 1983. The institutional records show that 23 women entered in 1983; the other five were presumably there from 1982. Eight of the 28 were from Co Donegal, 13 from Northern Ireland and seven from other counties. The report noted that 15 mothers kept their child; 11 were placed for adoption and two babies died. The average length of stay was 72 days.
- 26.14 At any one time, there were only a small number of women resident, for example, in June 1984, there were four women and one child present and two women in hospital. In 1997, a total of six women entered the Castle; this may reflect the move to a smaller premises.
- 26.15 Because women tended to stay for a while and then leave but return, it is difficult to be accurate about the length of stay. The average length of stay before the birth for those women who stayed until the birth was 62 days. The average length of stay after the birth was 27 days.
- 26.16 The women who were in the Castle were quite a diverse group. They came from many different parts of Ireland and a number came from Northern Ireland. There were a number of professionally qualified women. There was at least one third level student who travelled to her course in Derry from the Castle. Some of the younger women went to school from the Castle and a teacher came in to one woman. There were a few women from a Traveller background and, in the later years, some immigrant women (a few may have been illegal immigrants). There were women with intellectual disabilities (generally mild) and some with serious mental health, addiction, social deprivation or related issues. Some had seriously deficient parenting skills and this caused the staff a great deal of concern. It appears that, particularly in the late 1990s/2000s, the placement of a woman with her baby in the Castle served as an alternative to social workers seeking a care order through the courts. From the 1990s onwards various supports and services were offered to the women in the Castle such as counselling and parenting courses and behavioural therapy.

26.17 The Castle diaries provide some insight into the personalities of the women. Some were meek, somewhat bewildered by their situation and probably frightened while others were feisty, outspoken and well able to stand up for themselves. Not surprisingly, there is considerable evidence of emotional upset, sometimes following a meeting or phone call with family members, and particularly when leaving the children with foster parents or in the orphanage and when wrestling with the decision on adoption.

## **The children**

### **Older children**

26.18 Pregnant women were allowed bring any older children with them to the Castle. In total, 64 such children were resident there over the period covered by this report. The children of school going age were brought to school by taxi which was paid for by the NWHB. In general, these children did not stay in the Castle while their mothers were in hospital; other arrangements were made such as placing them in St Mura's, Fahan or with a foster family. They returned to the Castle when their mother did.

26.19 Where women had other children who were not staying with them, these children were brought to visit (they are not recorded among the resident children).

### **Babies**

26.20 The babies were born in maternity hospitals - mainly Letterkenny Hospital and Altnagelvin Hospital, Derry. The NWHB social worker who gave evidence to the Commission said that all women who were referred by the health board gave birth in Letterkenny while a number of women referred by CURA gave birth in Altnagelvin. It appears that the question of using Altnagelvin was somewhat contentious. In 1993, the issue of using Altnagelvin was discussed by the management committee; the staff member recorded 'it's still only to be exceptional cases due to the politics (religion) of the high up people on the board'. It is not known what exactly constituted an exceptional case but it is possible that the different rules about adoption in Northern Ireland may have been a factor; in particular, the situation of extra-marital children was easier to deal with in Northern Ireland.

- 26.21 Five babies died in the period 1984-1998; two died in 1983, one in 1984, one in 1988 and one in 1989. All died soon after birth in the hospitals in which they were born. The diaries record that the staff were upset by the deaths and they helped with funeral arrangements if the mothers were not getting family assistance.
- 26.22 The newly born infants sometimes came to the Castle with their mothers but some went straight from the hospital to foster parents or to St Mura's Orphanage in Fahan.<sup>4</sup> The NWHB made arrangements for the women whom they had referred while the CURA social workers made the arrangements for the women they referred. If the women had decided to place the baby for adoption, the NWHB arranged for the baby to be placed with foster parents while CURA arranged that the baby went to St Mura's. The women visited the babies in their foster homes; they were encouraged and facilitated by the Castle staff to do this. Sometimes the foster parents brought the child to the Castle to visit the mother.
- 26.23 The NWHB social worker told the Commission that the health board had no difficulty in finding suitable foster parents. The diaries provide evidence of dedicated, selfless foster parents who took babies for short periods while adoptions were being arranged or while the mothers were still considering their options.
- 26.24 The length of stay of the babies who went to the Castle was quite short - generally not more than two to four weeks. In some cases, the babies were placed in foster care while the mother stayed in the Castle even if she had not yet made a decision on adoption. The records usually show that decisions were made to keep the baby or to place for adoption but it is not always clear what the final outcome was. There is evidence of a number of women changing their minds more than once on keeping the child or placing the child for adoption - see below.

### **Day to day life in the Castle**

- 26.25 The Castle records include the work records for the staff during the period 23 July 1984 - 24 December 2000. The staff were local women who, in the Commission's view, showed a great deal of empathy and, possibly more importantly, common sense. In general, a staff member was present during the day but not necessarily

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<sup>4</sup> Connections between Fahan and children's homes in Northern Ireland are mentioned in the Report of the Northern Ireland Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry:  
<https://www.hiainquiry.org/sites/hiainquiry/files/media-files/Chapter%201%20-%20Introduction.pdf>

for the whole day and there were occasional days when there were no staff present. Again, in general, the staff did not stay overnight but a staff member sometimes stayed overnight if she thought her presence might be required or if there was a concern about a particular resident.

- 26.26 As already stated, the Castle Diaries provide a very good insight into daily life. They record the normal problems of everyday life - delays in getting maintenance done, problems with the heating system or the washing machines; there were persistent problems with leaks and with getting maintenance men to come when they had said they would. These details are interspersed with references to possible child abuse; potential self-harm; psychiatric health issues; drink problems; and manipulative boyfriends and families.
- 26.27 The diaries describe in some detail what each resident did or felt - for example, got up late, stayed out late, was very quiet, was depressed, got phone calls (sometimes the phone calls caused distress); was visited by boyfriend, by parent(s), friends; went out with boyfriends/friends; had a few drinks.
- 26.28 The NWHB senior social worker told the Commission that the objective of the Castle was to provide a space for women with unplanned pregnancies who did not want to stay at home and who needed to think about the future. She said that 'It was the automatic assumption in other homes that the baby would be put up for adoption'. The plan was to have communal eating and living areas; the women would work together in cooking meals and planning menus. It would not be institutional; the bedrooms were big enough to accommodate a mother and more than one child.
- 26.29 While the women were expected to look after themselves and their children, it seems that, in practice, they got a great deal of help from the staff especially if a staff member thought that the mother was not properly caring for the child. The women kept their own rooms clean and took turns to deal with the communal areas, light the fire and carry out normal household activities. Sometimes they had to be reminded by the staff to do these things. Some cooked just for themselves, others cooked for all the residents; the diaries suggest that many bought ready cooked food or made use of a local fast food outlet.

**Family attitudes**

- 26.30 It appears that the majority of families were aware of the pregnancy and of the women's presence in the Castle. However, there are examples where the family thought that the woman had gone abroad.
- 26.31 There are a number of examples of women visiting with their parents to see what the Castle was like before deciding to go there. Some families were supportive and visited frequently. Where relationships were reasonably good, there was considerable contact between the women and their families and with the fathers of their children. All were able to visit freely. The women often went on outings with their families or the fathers of their children. Some women went home for evenings and weekends or went out with their boyfriends (sometimes staying away overnight) and then returned to the Castle. Occasionally a friend stayed the night in the Castle.
- 26.32 Some of the women did return to their family homes with their babies but these arrangements did not always prove successful. Other families, while supportive to a degree, were very conscious of keeping secrecy; there are examples of parents warning their daughters not to go outside the Castle in case they would be recognised.
- 26.33 Some women were completely shunned by their families. In 1986, a woman's brother phoned to tell her not to dare to come back with the baby and to give it up for adoption; it seems he had told their mother that she had had a baby but it had died. Other parents made it clear that the woman was not to return home. As late as 2002, a mother is recorded as telling her daughter that 'no man will want her now'. An 18-year-old was put out of her home by her mother when she became pregnant in 2005.
- 26.34 Some of the fathers of the children were supportive and visited the Castle. In one case, the father of the child wanted the woman to stay in the Castle for longer as he could get to see her more often without his wife being suspicious!

**Payments by the residents**

- 26.35 The records show that in the period January 1987 - October 1990 women were expected to pay £24 a week for themselves, £5 a week for a baby and £7 for an older child. It is not clear if these payments were always made; there is some

evidence that lesser amounts were paid and that payments were made on behalf of some women by the organisations that referred them to the Castle. The social worker who gave evidence to the Commission said she understood the women paid about £16 or £17 a week for their stay.

26.36 Almost all of the women would have had an income. A small number were working while staying at the Castle. They travelled by bus to Letterkenny or Derry for work. Some were entitled to Maternity Benefit. A small number were on maternity leave from work where full payment was made by their employer (for example, public servants). Those who already had children were most likely receiving the Unmarried Mother's Allowance (and monthly Child Benefit) and those who had no other source of income were receiving weekly Supplementary Welfare Allowance. In January 1987, the rate of Unmarried Mother's Allowance (UMA) was £44.90 a week with £11.25 for the first child and £12.35 for subsequent children. The rate of weekly Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) was £33.50 (plus extra amounts for children but, once the child was born, the woman would have gone onto UMA). In 1990, the UMA rate was £53 a week with £13.50 for each child. The SWA weekly rate was £45.

26.37 Women from Northern Ireland received social welfare payments from there, sometimes by post. Some travelled to the Northern Ireland Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) to collect allowances/benefits. There is some evidence of payment being claimed from both jurisdictions - a woman who was receiving SWA was also signing on for the dole in Derry.

26.38 The payments by the women were given to the staff on Friday and the staff bought the food and other requirements for the house. Maintenance costs and utilities were paid directly by the NWHB. The house mother understood that the diocese of Derry reimbursed the health board for some of the costs involved.

#### **Concern about privacy**

26.39 Although many of the women moved around freely and did not seem to be concerned about being recognised, others were concerned. One woman stayed in her room all day because she recognised a workman who was carrying out maintenance and was afraid he would see her.

- 26.40 A staff member was concerned about the Census forms in 1986. She was advised (she phoned a named person, probably in the local authority) that if there were any problem to put the names down as Ms A, B, C etc.

### **Medical care**

- 26.41 It is clear from the diary entries that standard medical care was provided. The women were taken to doctors or the hospital for regular ante-natal care. Nurses called to the Castle to take blood pressures. Local doctors and doctors in Letterkenny hospital spoke to the women about contraception. Women were brought to doctors and the hospital for post-natal visits. The children were brought for vaccinations. Doctors were called when required.

### **Interaction between women and staff**

- 26.42 The diaries show that the staff were very sympathetic towards the women and probably did more for them than was envisaged when the hostel was established. They recorded how the women were feeling, noted any pains or sicknesses during the pregnancy and called for a doctor when they considered this necessary. They were very attentive to the needs of the women, particularly as they approached their due date. On one occasion a staff member talked to an upset resident until 3 am. Constant supervision was provided for a mother with an intellectual disability. Staff stayed overnight because of a concern that a mother was abusing her child. A woman who alleged that she had been raped was taken to a Garda station.
- 26.43 The staff monitored the women and ensured that they got to hospital for the birth. Taxis were used to bring women to the hospital but sometimes a staff member drove the woman. On occasions, a staff member stayed with the woman while she gave birth. They frequently visited the women when they went into hospital and/or spoke to them on the phone during this time.
- 26.44 They often acted as advocates with the social workers or other officials and frequently made arrangements for the women to visit their families or to get appointments with health services. On a few occasions, they express their exasperation with particular behaviours but these are rare and understandable.
- 26.45 The staff brought the women and children on outings, for example, to the beach. It would appear that the staff went over and above the call of duty. For example, a

staff member collected a woman and her baby from Letterkenny hospital, called to Fahan to collect her other child and drove them all home.

### **Interaction with NWHB staff and social workers**

- 26.46 Social workers from the NWHB and the referring agencies visited the women in the Castle and in hospital. The community welfare officer (see Chapter 1) visited the Castle and helped the women claim their social welfare payments and other benefits. He delivered cheques to those who qualified for Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA). He helped them to apply for Child Benefit and, when they were leaving, he helped them with claiming Rent Supplement if they were getting rental accommodation. He also processed Exceptional Needs Payments to help the mothers with the costs of clothing for the children and sometimes with furniture for rental accommodation or local authority housing. It seems that the women got a highly personalised service and were not required to go to the health board offices as was the norm for most recipients of SWA (see Chapter 1 for information about SWA).
- 26.47 The staff and the health board officials helped with finding accommodation when the residents were due to leave.

### **Decision to keep the baby/place for adoption**

- 26.48 There is a great deal of evidence that the women agonised over the adoption decision and a number of women changed their minds a number of times. The diaries record the upset suffered by the women when they left the baby with foster parents or to St Mura's.
- 26.49 It is very clear from the diary entries that the attitude of the woman's parents was a very, probably the most, significant factor in the decision about whether to keep the baby or place for adoption. There is evidence of considerable pressure being exercised by families and sometimes by the fathers of the children. The house mother who spoke to the Commission was very conscious of, and concerned about, the pressure from parents for adoption.
- 26.50 The availability of accommodation was another major factor. The women were helped by the social workers to find accommodation but it was always difficult to find. In a number of cases, the diaries record the woman's initial determination to

keep the baby and then her gradual realisation that she would not be able to manage without family support which was not forthcoming.

- 26.51 There are some quite heart-breaking examples of the very difficult dilemmas women faced. One woman wanted to keep her child but knew she could not cope with two children. The child's father would beat her up if she proposed adoption. She could not live with him because he was mentally unstable. Another woman realised she would probably not be able to look after the baby because she suffered from a chronic illness.
- 26.52 The women often talked to the staff about their options. It appears that the staff were very careful not to express their own views but they did sometimes express serious concern about a mother's ability to care for her child. In some cases, the mothers recognised their inability.
- 26.53 There is evidence of some conflict between women and their social workers when making their decisions. One woman was described as 'seething with anger' at the social worker and the doctor. There was also some conflict between women's families and the social workers.
- 26.54 It seems that doctors and priests also discussed adoption with the women. For example, the hospital chaplain talked to one woman about keeping her baby; she thought he was 'very one sided in his opinions'; it is not entirely clear but it seems he was encouraging her to keep the baby.
- 26.55 It seems to the Commission that women were given the time and space to make their decisions.

### **Life after the Castle**

- 26.56 The Castle diaries provide some information on the lives of the women and children after they left the Castle as a number of the women stayed in touch with the staff. There are some examples of women leaving the Castle after giving birth and living in a flat for some time but then returning to the Castle. There are also examples of former residents coming back for visits and spending a night/weekend. The staff of the Castle continued to be concerned about the women even after they had left.

- 26.57 The women who moved into rented accommodation with their children and who remained in touch with the Castle staff had some difficulties with keeping their accommodation and with managing their children. Former residents frequently phoned the Castle staff for advice. Sometimes the staff contacted social workers on their behalf, for example, when a woman was evicted.
- 26.58 The house mother was interviewed by the Commission in 2016. At that stage, she was still getting Christmas cards and occasional phone calls from former residents.
- 26.59 When asked in 2002 by a child, who was entering the Castle with her mother, what kind of place it was, a staff member replied that 'it was a home for people to come for a wee break'.