

## Chapter 29: Stranorlar county home

### Introduction

- 29.1 The workhouse in Lifford Road, Stranorlar was built in 1845. It occupied a seven-acre site and could accommodate up to 400 'inmates'. The building followed George Wilkinson's typical design. An entrance and administrative block at the south contained a Porter's Room and waiting room at the centre with the Board of Guardians' board room on the first floor above. The main accommodation block had the master's quarters at the centre with male and female wings to each side. At the rear, a range of single-storey utility rooms, such as bake house and wash house, connected through to the infirmary and 'idiot's ward' via a central spine containing the chapel and dining hall. During the famine in the mid-1840s, a 60-bed fever hospital was erected at the north of the workhouse, beyond which lay the burial ground.<sup>1</sup>
- 29.2 Like all workhouses, Stranorlar was administered by a Board of Guardians (see Chapter 1). The master and matron were responsible for the day to day running of the workhouse. In 1899, the Sisters of Mercy became involved and provided the matron and nursing staff.
- 29.3 The Donegal County Scheme for the reorganisation of poor law institutions was given statutory recognition under the *Local Government (Temporary Provisions) Act 1923* (see Chapter 1). The *County Scheme Order, Tirconaill No. 1 1923* provided that the workhouse at Stranorlar would be the county home for 'aged and infirm persons, chronic invalids, pregnant mothers, imbeciles and epileptics'.<sup>2</sup> The Donegal scheme did not make separate arrangements for unmarried mothers and their children.

### Sources

#### Indoor Registers

- 29.4 The HSE (which is the current owner of what was the Stranorlar county home) gave the Commission access to digital copies of the Indoor Registers (record of

<sup>1</sup> [www.workhouses.org.uk/Stranorlar/](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Stranorlar/)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1923/sro/919/made/en/print>

admissions) of the home. This collection comprised six PDF documents, each a scanned copy of a register, covering the periods:

- 30 January 1921 - 31 March 1932 (179 pages, 4,581 entries)
- 1 April 1932 - 31 Dec 1942 (192 pages, 4,918 entries)
- 1 May 1943 - 30 April 1948 (118 pages, 2,520 entries)
- 1 May 1948 - 31 August 1957 (135 pages, 2,960 entries)
- 1 September 1957 - 31 January 1974 (140 pages, 3,000 entries)
- 1 February 1974 - 31 March 1994 (132 pages, 2,920 entries)

29.5 Each register included an alphabetical index of patients with surname, first name and reference number. The main body of the register included individual entries with the following information given: register number; date admitted; whether born in workhouse; name; residence prior to admission, sex; age; if adult, single, married or widowed; if child, orphaned, deserted, 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate'; employment; religious denomination; if disabled what type of disability; name of wife/husband if not in workhouse; number of children if not in workhouse; observations on condition of 'inmates' when admitted; and date discharged or died. From 1932 there were further columns to record name and address of nearest relative and folio maintenance register. Maternal and infant deaths which occurred in the institution were also noted.

29.6 Where single pregnant women were admitted, some entries included details of the putative father. Where children were boarded out or sent to another institution, this information is also included in the register.

29.7 Single pregnant women and unmarried mothers were not identified as such in the indoor registers.<sup>3</sup> Although marital status was recorded on admission, women were not identified as maternity cases. However, entries relating to newborn infants and children had an associated note such as 'child of No. 1234' attached which allowed the Commission's researchers to identify the mother of a child and to determine if she was married or single.

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<sup>3</sup> Women entered workhouses for various reasons, for example, because they were old or poor, and not exclusively because they were pregnant or had children. There is a suggestion in the anecdotal evidence (below) that Traveller women (almost certainly married) may have entered Stranorlar to give birth.

**Department of Health**

- 29.8 The Department of Health gave the Commission substantial files with detailed reports about the Stranorlar county home. The files used for this chapter are INACT/INA/0/434275 and INACT/INA/0/434370.

**Donegal County Archives**

- 29.9 The Donegal county archives have a range of relevant material including
- BH/1-19, Minutes of the Board of Health and Public Assistance, 1922-42 (19 volumes):
  - County Manager's Orders 1942-98 (300 volumes)
  - CC/17/3-11 County Medical Officer Annual Reports
  - CC/15/4/6 County Council correspondence with Board of Health.
  - CC/17/17 County Home Donegal 1946-53 (Paying orders and building plans)
  - CC/30/58 Burial ground correspondence
  - CC/30/59 Number of burials 1944-45
  - BH/2/1/23 Board of Health Reports and Correspondence 1933-35

**The women**

- 29.10 The surviving indoor registers relating to Stranorlar county home cover the period January 1921 to March 1994. The last single pregnant woman admitted was recorded in 1964 but admissions of single pregnant women all but stopped in 1960. Between 1921 and 1960, about 22,000 people were admitted to the institution. The Commission identified 1,646 as single pregnant women and/or single women accompanied by children. The Commission also identified 1,777 'illegitimate' children who were born in or admitted to the institution - 181 were admitted to the institution unaccompanied and 122 were admitted with their expectant mothers. The women and children who are the subject of this investigation constituted 15.5% of all admissions to Stranorlar county home during the period under review.
- 29.11 The Stranorlar indoor registers show that administrators were quite diligent in obtaining the name, address and other information relating to 'supposed fathers' from all single pregnant women entering the institution with a view to pursuing the men for maintenance. In June 1923, the *Donegal News* reported that the storekeeper was responsible for extracting this information from women on

admission. It is worth noting that the storekeeper also had responsibility for retrieving the cost of treatment from patients maintained in the county home by the board of assistance and who were later found to have the means to pay. He received a commission of 5% of all monies recouped.<sup>4</sup> There is little doubt that the trauma experienced by women on their admission to the county home, pregnant and destitute, was exacerbated by the pressure to name the putative father. On those rare occasions when a putative father did appear before a court, there is no evidence to suggest that proceedings were successful.

- 29.12 The Stranorlar indoor registers were well-maintained and contain a wealth of information on single pregnant women admitted there. Single pregnant women had the same rights of access to hospital maternity services as married pregnant women. However, if a woman could not return to her family home with her child or was unable to support herself and the child, her only option was to remain in Stranorlar county home or to seek admission there after the birth.

### **Admissions**

- 29.13 Admission rates of single pregnant women/single women accompanied by a child rose steadily from 14 admissions during 1921 to a peak of 71 admissions during 1948. By 1950, admissions had declined by almost 50% with 35 admissions recorded for that year. Admissions fell dramatically between 1950 and 1964. After this period, the county home began to cater almost exclusively for the care of older people. It was renamed St Joseph's Community Hospital and continues to operate as a public nursing home to this day.

### **Age Range**

- 29.14 The Indoor Registers recorded the age of 1,630 single pregnant women admitted to Stranorlar between 1924 and 1962. The youngest maternity admission was 13 years old and the oldest was 53 years old. The average age on admission was 24 years. Most admissions (75%) were aged between 18 and 29 years; 19% were 30 years and older and 6% were aged between 13 and 17 years.

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<sup>4</sup> *Donegal News*, 2 June 1923.

**Home Address**

- 29.15 The registers show that 99.8% of single pregnant women admitted to Stranorlar gave a home address in Co Donegal (1,607). The remaining women gave a home address in Sligo (11); Tyrone (5); Derry (3); Cork (3) and Antrim (1).

**Occupations**

- 29.16 The registers show that over 99% of single pregnant women admitted to Stranorlar were employed as domestic servants; a small number were factory workers, working in the hospitality industry or shop workers. Two were recorded as secretaries and one as a teacher.

**Religion**

- 29.17 The registers show that 98% of the single pregnant women admitted to Stranorlar were Roman Catholics: the remaining women were either Church of Ireland or Presbyterian.

**Previous pregnancies**

- 29.18 The registers show that at least 14.7% of single pregnant women were admitted to Stranorlar on their second or subsequent pregnancy.

**Exit pathways**

- 29.19 The registers suggest that 52% of single mothers returned to their family home or to the home of a relative on discharge from Stranorlar. It appears that the administrators of the home took measures to ensure that single women and their children were discharged to a named person, preferably a family member. In the few cases where a woman had no friend or relative to receive her, the matron assigned a nurse to accompany mother and child on discharge.
- 29.20 Other places of discharge recorded include other hospital (86); unspecified Good Shepherd Convent (19)<sup>5</sup>; psychiatric hospital (13); domestic situations (seven); mother and baby home (three); other county home (two); industrial school (one) and unspecified Magdalen laundry (one).

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<sup>5</sup> Almost certainly a Magdalen Laundry.

**Maternal mortality**

- 29.21 The Commission identified 20 deaths among single pregnant women and unmarried mothers admitted to the home as recorded in the institutional records between 1922 and 1946. All but one death occurred in the institution: one occurred in Letterkenny fever hospital following transfer there. One woman died on the day she was admitted to the institution while others died having spent between three and five years living there. Women were aged between 17 and 45 years at the time of death.
- 29.22 Six maternal deaths were notified as being due to childbirth related causes such as eclampsia and puerperal sepsis representing a maternal mortality rate of 0.48%. Other causes of death included cardiac failure, pulmonary tuberculosis, influenza, typhoid and tabes mesenterica.

**Children****Child admission pathways**

- 29.23 Between 1921 and 1962, 1,777 children were either born in or admitted to Stranorlar county home. Of these, 83% were either born there or admitted with their mother; 10% were born in another institution and transferred to the county home with their mother; 10% were admitted unaccompanied and almost 7% were older siblings admitted with their expectant mother.

**Exit pathways**

- 29.24 The 'illegitimate' children spent between one day and six years in Stranorlar. Most spent less than three months in the institution accompanied by their mothers. A small number of children who spent extended periods there were generally children with a physical or mental disability. The board of public assistance often found it impossible to get suitable foster homes for such children who were usually transferred to a specialist hospital or industrial school. Most children (57%) were discharged from Stranorlar with their mothers and are recorded as going to live in the mother's family home or with another relative. These children did not show up in the Donegal Board of Public Assistance boarding out records, and very few were subsequently identified in any other local authority assistance records. However, it is probable that many, if not most, of these children were nursed out in the community under private arrangements between the parent and a nurse mother, where the parent either paid a lump sum or monthly or quarterly payments for the

care of her child. Although nurse mothers were obliged under the *Children Act 1908* to notify the local authority of such arrangements, it would appear that very few did so. In fact, just 25 children recorded in the county home register (1.4%) are subsequently recorded as being 'at nurse' in the Donegal Board of Public Assistance records.

- 29.25 A woman who could not return to her family home, and who was not in a position to support herself and her child, or to pay for a nurse mother to care for her child, had little option but to place her child for boarding out by the local authority. Over one in four single women (27%) admitted to Stranorlar subsequently did this.
- 29.26 Almost 10% of 'illegitimate' children transferred from Stranorlar to another institution. The Sisters of Mercy at Stranorlar had an unofficial arrangement with the Sisters of Nazareth who ran the Nazareth Homes in Derry and Belfast and St Mura's orphanage/nursery at Fahan, Donegal. The Commission identified 40 children discharged from Stranorlar who were subsequently admitted to one of the Nazareth Homes. Most of these children were placed in the Nazareth Homes by the mother or another family member; a small number were placed there by clergy. Prior to the 1950s, children from Donegal who were placed in a Nazareth Home were not under the aegis of the Donegal Board of Public Assistance. Parents voluntarily placed their children in the care of the Sisters of Nazareth and the Donegal Board of Public Assistance did not regard these children as their responsibility. In the 1950s, the public assistance authority began to send children to Nazareth Homes and paid for their maintenance there. However, public assistance records created after 1950 anonymised the children concerned and the Commission could not establish how many children were maintained in Nazareth Homes by Donegal County Council.<sup>6</sup>
- 29.27 During the period under review, one in five children born in or admitted to Stranorlar county home died there. The Commission confirmed 339 infant deaths by cross-checking them against records held in the GRO.

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<sup>6</sup> *Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry in Northern Ireland, 1922-95* (The Hart Report), Volume II; Chapter IV, 'Sisters of Nazareth Derry/Londonderry': <https://www.hiainquiry.org/sites/hiainquiry/files/media-files/Chapter%205%20-%20Module%201%20-%20Sisters%20of%20Nazareth%20Derry-Londonderry.pdf>

**Infant and child mortality**

- 29.28 The institutional records of Stranorlar county home for the years 1921-56 suggest that 343 'illegitimate' children born in or admitted to the institution died in infancy or early childhood. Cross reference with records held by the GRO confirmed 339 child deaths.
- 29.29 Most deaths (75%) occurred among children who were accompanied in the institution by their mothers; 25% of deaths occurred among unaccompanied children. Most deaths (98%) occurred in the institution; 2% occurred subsequent to the child's transfer to the county hospital, Letterkenny. One child was recorded as having died in a 'mental hospital'. About 82% of deaths occurred among children who were born in the institution and 18% occurred among children who were admitted after birth.
- 29.30 About 87% of deaths occurred in infants less than twelve months old. Among these 17% were less than a week old; 15% were between one week and one month old and 55% were aged between one and twelve months at the time of death. The remaining deaths occurred among children aged one year and over.
- 29.31 Infant and child deaths were highest in the years 1925-32, peaking in 1930 when 22 deaths were recorded. Infant and child deaths were also relatively high during the war years, peaking in 1944 when 17 deaths were recorded. There was a noticeable reduction in 1948 when just two deaths were recorded; this was down from 17 in the previous year.
- 29.32 The death rate among 'illegitimate' children in Stranorlar county home was highest in the 1920s and peaked in 1930 when a rate of 42% was recorded; two in every five 'children born/admitted that year subsequently died. The institutional death rate among 'illegitimate' children averaged 24.5% throughout the 1930s and 18.4% throughout the 1940s. In 1956, the last year in which maternity services were available in the institution, a death rate of around 10% was recorded among 'illegitimate' children.
- 29.33 As is noted below, the institutional medical officer informed the DLGPH that the death rate among children in Stranorlar county home in 1930 was 68%. Analysis of institutional records and death records held by the GRO suggests that the medical officer's return included all child deaths in the institution, 'legitimate' and

'illegitimate'. Similarly, a return to the Department of Health for the period 1 April 1951 to 31 March 1952 stated that the death rate among children in the institution was 30%. This return most likely included deaths which occurred among all children in the institution also. The institutional records do not accord with these figures: they show that the death rate among 'illegitimate' children in this period was closer to 15%.

- 29.34 The most common cause of death among 'illegitimate children' in Stranorlar county home was respiratory infection: over 60% of deaths were attributed to bronchitis and pneumonia. About 12% of deaths were attributed to non-specific causes such as prematurity, congenital debility or weakness from birth and a further 10% were attributed to other causes such as birth injury, difficult birth and icterus neonatorum. Around 4% of deaths were attributed to congenital syphilis and 3% to malabsorption or marasmus. Other causes of death such as tuberculosis, convulsions, haemorrhage, congenital heart disease, influenza, measles, spina bifida, gastroenteritis, diphtheria, and meningitis featured to a lesser extent.

### **Burials**

- 29.35 The first reference to a burial ground at Stranorlar county home appears in February 1927. An entry recorded by the institution's storekeeper proposed an extension to the burial ground and asked permission to purchase stone, lime and sand to undertake the groundwork. In June 1927, another entry by the storekeeper stated that the county architect had inspected the burial ground site 'some time ago' and suggested that the 'healthier inmates' should be employed to do the ground work for the extension and that a contractor would be hired to build a boundary wall. However, it appears that no work was conducted, and the storekeeper complained that the overcrowded nature of the burial ground meant that 'burials have already been made in open ground'.
- 29.36 The historical Ordnance Survey map below shows that the burial ground in use at Stranorlar county home was the original workhouse burial ground located north of the main building. The burial ground was subsequently doubled in size to take in the plot of land to the east of the site.
- 29.37 In April 1939, the storekeeper again reported that the burial ground was almost full and required extension. As there was a natural depression in the land between

the burial ground and the fever hospital a main drain to service the new burial ground site could not be carried through the county home fields. The board of assistance requested permission from the owner of an adjacent field to run a drainage pipe through his land. However, the board was already engaged in a legal dispute with the landowner and negotiations did not go well. In May 1945, the storekeeper reported that the county home burial ground was now 'in a wretched state' and had been 'a matter of complaint by clergymen of every denomination'. The storekeeper further complained that the site was not suitable for a burial ground as the ground was 'shallow and full of rocks and springs'. Two years later, in 1947, the matron complained to the board that the burial ground was now 'in a deplorable condition' and that 'it was unattended to and remained a matter of complaint by the clergy'. In April 1948, the curate complained that it was 'overcrowded and graves were over lapping'. As a result, the gravedigger had split another coffin while digging a grave which was reportedly 'very unpleasant for all'. Following an inspection by the county engineer, work to open a new burial ground began in May 1949. The first burial at the new burial ground took place on 27 February 1950.



29.38 The Google Maps image above shows the location of the old workhouse burial ground outlined in red and the site of the new County Home burial ground outlined in blue. Both sites are now part of the fairways of Stranorlar and Ballybofey Golf Club.

29.39 A Burial Register relating to the new burial ground is held at St Conal's Hospital, Letterkenny, and records 131 burials there between 27 February 1950 and 2 January 1973. However, none of the recorded burials relates to infants or children. Around 30 'illegitimate' children died in Stranorlar county home in the period February 1950 and January 1973 but none appears in this Burial Register. It is possible that all were buried in family plots but, considering the circumstances which led to their being born or admitted to Stranorlar county home, this is highly unlikely. It seems reasonable to assume, and the evidence strongly suggests, that most 'illegitimate' children who died in Stranorlar county home were buried with other deceased 'inmates' in the old workhouse cemetery. The institutional records show that a carpenter was employed on a regular basis to make coffins, and notably 'small coffins', which suggests that the deceased were buried in lined red deal caskets and burial ceremonies were conducted by one of the three chaplains attached to the institution. The rocky terrain of the old burial ground could not facilitate deep graves and the institutional records clearly state that graves were shallow and that bodies were buried in an ad-hoc manner.

### **Living Conditions**

29.40 More is known about the living conditions in Stranorlar county home than in the other county homes examined by the Commission. This is mainly because the detailed reports of inspectors from the DLGPH and later the Department of Health have been available to the Commission.

29.41 In May 1924, the matron reported that Stranorlar county home was 'very congested', and that there was 'little available room for children'. In November 1924, a board member raised the question of the overcrowding and proposed that the disused workhouse at Ballyshannon be used as an auxiliary home. The question of which 'class' should be transferred would be left to the Minister for Local Government and Public Health to decide. In March 1925, an inspector from the Department of Local Government and Public Health (DLGPH) visited Stranorlar and recommended the immediate removal of children from the institution because 'the contact with other inmates will have a very bad effect on their health, both bodily and mentally'. The minister suggested, as a temporary expedient, the removal of all infants and mothers to the Ballyshannon workhouse building. However, most board of health members were averse to the proposal and refused to do so.

29.42 In October 1924, the minister wrote to the secretary of Donegal Board of Health and Public Assistance asking to be informed of the steps the board was taking to find suitable homes for children in the county home who were suitable for boarding out. In March 1926, the matron submitted a list of children and sought a ruling on the advisability of having them boarded out. She advised that these children were 'generally of the illegitimate class whose mothers are also in the County Home'. The board agreed that the illegitimate children should be boarded out but only in cases 'where this course is not objectionable to the mothers'. However, the DLGPH also directed that:

Children boarded out whose mothers are alive and not resident in the County Home should be placed at nurse as far as possible from the district in which the mother resides, except in cases where the mother contributes to the support of the child. If this is not done, the probability is that the mother gives constant trouble to the foster parent.

29.43 The DLGPH maintained a keen interest in the health and wellbeing of every boarded-out child in Donegal. Although it pressured the Donegal board to find suitable foster homes for children in the county home the department closely scrutinised applications from prospective foster parents. The criteria laid down by the department as to what made a foster home 'suitable' to receive a boarded-out child were quite demanding - see Chapter 11. Local authority records for Donegal suggest that most assistance officers did not inspect foster homes and boarded out children with any regularity. Of the 20 assistance officers working in Donegal in the 1920s, just two returned monthly inspection reports on boarded out children.

29.44 In February 1925, discussions about the proposed removal of unmarried women and their children from Stranorlar were recorded in the *Donegal Democrat*. A DLGPH inspector, Dr Brendan McCarthy, initially raised the issue due to concerns over the congested living conditions there. Dr McCarthy received support from some members of the Donegal board of health. However, the board stated that 'drastic measures were being taken to reduce the rates' and this would determine the level of any alterations to be undertaken. A board member warned that the levels of overcrowding at Stranorlar increased the chances of an outbreak of typhoid and if that happened 'no one would clear us of the responsibility'. Another member stated that at least half of the 'inmates' in the county home were mentally afflicted and recommended that the board establish a hospital in the county to provide separate accommodation for unmarried mothers and their children outside

of the county home system. He argued that ‘the children would then be free from the influence that would be detrimental to their character’. He complained that the issue had been under consideration for years and that the board had not acted. The chairman of the board agreed that the ‘morals and health of these children should be taken into consideration, so that they may be morally and physically fit to fill their position in life capably’.

29.45 It was suggested that the board of health should remove unmarried mothers and their children from the county home and accommodate them in other hospitals in the county as a stop gap measure. However, it was also pointed out that unmarried mothers undertook most of the work in Stranorlar county home and if they were removed ‘a large number of staff’ would have to be employed to replace them. A member, who appeared to be both surprised and appalled at the revelation that unmarried mothers undertook most of the work in the county home, argued that they should not have been housed there in the first place and that the board should hire people to work in the county home who would run the place efficiently. This suggestion and the expense attached drew the ire of some board members. One member stated that children in the county home were ‘much better off than a good many children outside’. Another said that the transfer of women and children would cost up to £1,000 and another argued that the transfer would in effect ‘create two County Homes’. The board voted in favour of postponing the matter.<sup>7</sup>

29.46 In May 1925, a board of health member, Mr McGeadie, raised the question of providing employment for unmarried mothers in Stranorlar county home. He cited ‘the nuns in Scotland’ as a good example as they ‘successfully ran laundries providing employment for these people which gave them a better outlook on life’. He stated that ‘these unfortunate people’ under the present system were ‘branded with pauperism’ on leaving the county home. The chairman of the board, Mr Gallen, suggested that this was not such a serious matter in Donegal and that ‘a large proportion of these people were feeble minded’. Mr McGeadie replied, ‘I do not mean to insinuate that Donegal is an immoral county, but something must be done for the unfortunate few who have fallen’.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Donegal Democrat*, 20 February 1925.

<sup>8</sup> *Donegal Democrat*, 22 May 1925.

- 29.47 Admissions of single women and their children to Stranorlar county home increased during 1924 and 1925. In January 1925, 29 single mothers and 51 ‘illegitimate’ children were living there. By December, numbers had increased to 36 women and 56 children. Overall occupancy in the home had increased from 275 to 292 over the same period and suggests that the board of health took no action to address the overcrowded conditions in the institution.
- 29.48 A report on the Tirconaill (Donegal) County Scheme, contained in the *Report of the Commission of the Sick and Destitute Poor*, confirmed that Stranorlar county home was ‘fully occupied’ and that the home was ‘prone to overcrowding’. Furthermore, the commission heard that there was no classification of ‘inmates’ on the female side of the institution and that single healthy women lived in extremely close quarters with ‘old women, lunatics and imbeciles’. The report also highlighted the inadequate and defective sanitary arrangements at the county home. It stated that the water supply was bad, there were two flush closets in the old infirmary part of the home, none in the main body of the home and that ‘the contrivances in the yards are very bad and rather revolting’.<sup>9</sup>
- 29.49 A report on Stranorlar county home by a DLGPH inspector confirmed that an inadequate water supply and the lack of flush closets, bathing and washing facilities ‘continues to be a great drawback to the Institution and impedes progress’. It is worth noting that a letter from the medical officer at the county hospital, Lifford complained of the unsanitary state of lavatory and bathing facilities available to women there and the fact that the operating theatre had no supply of hot water. The inspector stated that Donegal County Council had refused to remedy the deficiencies although administrators and medical staff working in the home had lodged complaints on numerous occasions.<sup>10</sup>
- 29.50 A report on Stranorlar county home made it clear that by 1927 the board of health had taken no remedial action to address the poor sanitary arrangements at the institution. At the time of this inspection, there were 269 residents in Stranorlar county home. The institution had two toilets and two ‘bad baths’ to cater for them:
- The sanitary arrangements are very defective. Barrow privies. There are 2 w.c.’s in the infirmary and one bad bath on each side. The condition of this

<sup>9</sup> *Report on the Commission of the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, including the Insane Poor, 1927*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> *Donegal Democrat*, 21 August 1925.

Home is most unsatisfactory owing to the absence of proper sanitary arrangements and drainage.

29.51 Other aspects of the home were also defective:

The beds and mattresses are mostly broken and dilapidated not fitting the floors where the old central trench still remains. The upper dormitories are unceiled and not heated. A new ward reconstructed out of an old store is the only pleasant-looking spot in the Institution. Lockers are required here. In the Fever Block which now accommodates the old men the ceilings are falling, and the walls are stained and broken. There is no disinfecting apparatus. With regard to the condition of the children some improvement has been made. In my last report, I drew attention to their dismal plight. Since then an Army hut has been erected to serve as a Day Room, and an old school room serves them for sleeping accommodation. Much more, however, needs to be done.

29.52 A report on the quality of water supplied to Stranorlar county home concluded that no sample was safe for drinking. Analysis of samples taken from the four wells supplying the home found that the water was 'grossly polluted with sewage or manurial matter' and 'other animal organic matter'. In 1927, a new well with an electric pump did much to improve the water quality, but the lack of a general water scheme in Stranorlar town ensured that the water supply to the county home remained insufficient. In 1928, the storekeeper reported that milk supplied by a local producer was analysed and found to have been deprived of 27.7% of its original fat. Repeated examination found that the milk supplied was of lesser quality than the general milk supply and often failed to meet minimum legal requirements regarding nutrition. Similarly, analysis of the bread supplied to the home found that it contained 2.2% ash and 1.24% cellulose, indicating that the producer used low grade flour and that the bread had little nutritional value. It seems that some commercial vendors supplying foodstuff to Stranorlar county home knowingly supplied products of inferior quality and of little nutritional value, without any regard for the health and wellbeing of the men, women and children housed in the institution.

29.53 The diet for female patients, unmarried mothers and children living in Stranorlar county home was as follows:

Breakfast, 8.00 am: 6 oz's. Bread, 1 oz. margarine, 1 pint tea.

Dinner,	1.00 pm:	4 oz's beef or mutton, 2 lbs potatoes, vegetables.
Evening Tea,	3.00 pm:	4 oz. bread, 0.5 pint tea, 0.5 oz. margarine.
Supper;		1 pint porridge, 1 pint milk.

- 29.54 Following representations from the minister, the DLGPH advised the authorities at Stranorlar county home that the amount of food given to residents was 'too excessive' and ordered them to reduce the food served to 'bring it in line with other County Homes'. Although no record of the suggested revised diet was located, it can be determined that the DLGPH directed that residents received three, rather than four, meals per day. It is also clear that the county home administrators ignored the minister's order for over two years and quietly continued to serve four meals per day. However, due to sustained pressure from the DLGPH, a reduced diet came into operation in the home in 1926. The storekeeper's reports show that the meat supplied to the home was also of variable quality and, on occasion, found to be rancid. In addition, a DLGPH report in 1926 stated that cooking arrangements in the home were 'bad' and advised that the board of health should provide a suitable kitchen for the institution.
- 29.55 Every DLGPH report on Stranorlar county home referred specifically to the 'primitive laundry arrangements' in operation there and to the complete absence of disinfecting apparatus. In her monthly reports, the matron listed the number of old rugs, blankets and sheets removed from the infirmary and recommissioned 'for nursery purposes'. It is not clear how these items were used in the nursery. Considering that this repurposing of bedding was common practice in the institution, an overcrowded institution without proper laundry or disinfecting facilities, it seems reasonable to assume this practice created increased opportunities for cross-infection among patients. Infants who came in contact with recommissioned items 'for nursery purposes' must have been most susceptible.
- 29.56 In 1929, members of Donegal County Council complained that the cost of running Stranorlar county home exceeded the cost of running all pre-amalgamation workhouses. The chairman of the board of health presented figures that showed that the cost of running it during 1929 was in fact £2,474.00 less than the cost in 1922. In light of increased pressure for reductions in the rates, there was little hope of local authority investment in the home and demands for greater economy

relating to the cost of running the institution ensured that calls to improve the living conditions of those housed there would not be realised.<sup>11</sup>

- 29.57 There were multiple outbreaks of typhoid in Stranorlar county home during 1930. The first outbreak was in May and five people were removed to Letterkenny fever hospital. The county medical officer, Dr O'Deagha, stated that the outbreak was 'undoubtedly caused by the defective sanitary arrangements in the Home' which he observed 'associated one's mind with concentration camps'. In September, two further outbreaks of typhoid occurred; both originated in the female side of the home. Twelve women contracted the disease; three died. It subsequently transpired that blocked drains on the women's side of the home caused a buildup of 'excrement and other effluent'. Donegal also experienced an outbreak of enteric fever in 1930: it occurred in the Stranorlar District and had its origin in the county home. Again, the county medical officer highlighted the 'almost primitive sanitary arrangements prevailing at the Home' and the dangers that this posed to the 'large number of residents sheltered under its roof'.
- 29.58 The extremely poor living conditions in Stranorlar county home may also explain the excessively high infant mortality rates recorded in the institution during 1930. The institutional medical officer reported that, of the 37 infants born or admitted during 1930, 23 died there.<sup>12</sup> Remarkably, this high infant mortality received no attention in the reports of the Donegal Board of Health and Public Assistance. The board did receive a letter from the Minister for Local Government and Public Health requesting a return showing the cause of death of each child who died in the home during the half year ended 30 September 1930. The Commission did not locate a reply in the Donegal public health records.
- 29.59 In February 1931, the minister again wrote to the Donegal board instructing them to 'give early attention to' and make 'necessary orders on several matters' highlighted by the departmental inspector, Mr Mc Lysaght, in his report on Stranorlar county home. The board replied stating that they were considering a scheme of general repair at the institution and had invited tenders for same. However, the board had decided that the provision of disinfecting apparatus was not a pressing issue and it formed no part of the proposed refurbishments.

<sup>11</sup> *Donegal Democrat*, 21 December 1929.

<sup>12</sup> The institutional records show that 1930 was the worst year for child deaths in Stranorlar but they do not tally with the medical officer's report that child mortality rates were in the region of 62%.

Similarly, the board chose to ignore a DLGPH recommendation to bring the maternity ward up to 'a state of modern efficiency'. The board advised the DLGPH that they would consider undertaking such work if they could participate in the Hospital Sweepstakes.

29.60 In July 1933, a report on Stranorlar county home by the DLGPH inspector, Dr Dillon, indicated that the board of health had made no effort to provide suitable laundry or disinfecting apparatus for the institution. Dr Dillon also noted that the board had made no improvements to the maternity ward, which she stated was 'very small and had no equipment'. As the institution catered for an average of 40 births annually, Dr Dillon advised the board of health and the DLGPH that 'some improvement should be considered'. In June 1934, another DLGPH inspector, Dr Doherty, reported that the wards in Stranorlar county home were unceiled and without central heating. He expressed concern that the wards were extremely cold during winter and this posed a danger to the elderly and to mothers and children in the nursery.

29.61 In June 1935, a letter from Dr J Gormley, obstetrician to Stranorlar county home, made it clear that the board had undertaken no remedial work to improve the institution's maternity ward and that conditions had deteriorated to the extent that he was refusing to treat maternity cases there. Dr Gormley stated:

Owing to lack of accommodation and want of modern methods, admission of patients to the Labour Ward has been discontinued for the past two months. The patients are now transferred to the District Hospitals. There is no bathroom and no supply of wash basins with running water, hot or cold. The department is of the most primitive kind and I recommend the formation of a new department with increased accommodation. There would be required: Prenatal Ward of 12 beds; Labour Ward of 2 beds; Puerperium Ward of 10 beds; two modern bathrooms and lavatories; Wash basins and sterilizers. This is an absolute necessity if the care of the pregnant mother in County Donegal is to receive anything like fair attention

29.62 In Dr Gormley's view, pregnant mothers in Stranorlar county home, single pregnant women in the main, were being let down by the distinct lack of investment in maternity services in the institution, a situation which put them at an unfair disadvantage. It is equally clear that Dr Gormley was no longer prepared to treat women under such 'primitive' conditions or subject women to inferior treatment. In

April 1935, he directed all pregnant women to attend one of the district hospitals in Donegal rather than seek admission to Stranorlar county home.

29.63 In February 1937, the county medical officer, Dr O'Deagha, reported that another outbreak of typhoid fever had occurred in Stranorlar county home. He stated that the main lesson to be learned from the outbreak was the importance of ensuring mechanisms for 'the safe disposal of excreta and an adequate supply of unpolluted water'. This suggests that sanitary arrangements at the county home in 1937 remained substandard and continued to pose a serious health hazard to those living in the institution.

29.64 In February 1939, the matron again drew attention to the 'very bad' sanitary condition of the institution and expressed her concerns regarding the safety of the maternity and cancer cases to the board of health. She stated:

There are 40 or 50 patients there mostly maternity and cancer cases. There are no latrines upstairs and the slops have to be carried down and emptied in a manhole in the yard. This crude method of sanitation is very serious and dangerous to patients and nurses. The matter has been reported time and time again by the Medical Officer but has been held in abeyance awaiting a grant from the Sweepstakes or something of the kind, and the trouble still continues.

29.65 Similarly, the storekeeper reported:

The ceiling in the hospital hall is falling and in danger of injuring any person passing. This is due to the crude state of a W.C. directly over the hall and immediately outside the maternity ward.

29.66 The matron's and storekeeper's reports were unambiguous in their assertions that Stranorlar county home remained in a shockingly bad state of repair. The lack of a latrine in the hospital ward necessitated the conveyance of faeces through the body of the home to be dumped in a hole in the yard. It has already been established that the home contained just two toilets. The storekeeper's report revealed that one of them was in such a 'crude state' that waste was flowing down into the floor underneath and into the maternity ward.

29.67 Inaction on the part of the Donegal Board of Health and Public Assistance ensured that poor sanitation in Stranorlar county home continued to blight the institution

throughout the 1930s. The brunt of this negligence fell heaviest on infants living in the county home. The institutional medical officer reported that although infant mortality fell from a high of 68% in 1930, a rate of 50% pertained over the decade. This suggests that one in every two infants born or admitted to the county home during this period died.<sup>13</sup> Local authority health records give no indication that either the Donegal Board of Health or the DLGPH gave this matter any consideration.

29.68 In February 1938, the board of health heard that three girls aged 15 or 16 years were admitted to the county home, pregnant. All three were boarded out children and the board referred the matter to the Gardaí.

29.69 In October 1939, Miss Alice Litster reported on boarded out children in Donegal. She noted that 103 children were on the boarded out register at that time. The Donegal board of assistance paid foster parents a maintenance allowance of £1 a month per child and a clothing allowance of £3 a year. Miss Litster observed:

The destitute children of the County are maintained in the County Home prior to being boarded out. As a general rule, they are boarded out at an early age. It is satisfactory to note that the Board of Health and the authorities of the County Home realise the advantage of placing them in foster homes at an early age before Institutional life has had time to put its mark on them. The atmosphere of a County Home is not an ideal one in which to rear children and they are apt to acquire bad habits, of which it is very difficult to rid them afterwards.

29.70 In September 1945, a DLGPH report on Stranorlar county home stated that 218 people were living in the institution. Although this was 25% lower than occupancy rates recorded during the 1930s, there was no reduction in the number of children housed there. At the time of inspection 39 children, ranging in age from 2 to 8 years, were living in the institution. The report noted that accommodation for children in the home was 'strictly limited' and that the nursery was 'very much overcrowded'.

29.71 In 1946, the matron reported that the county home nursery remained overcrowded and was too small to accommodate the number of children housed there. She

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<sup>13</sup> The Commission's engagement with the institutional records failed to confirm the mortality rates cited.

expressed her concern that the approaching winter would bring more admissions and there was insufficient floor space to accommodate any more children. In January 1947, the matron again remonstrated with the public assistance authority regarding the county home nursery. She complained that the nursery had remained overcrowded and that the available floor space, ventilation and lavatory accommodation were 'wholly inadequate' to cater for the number of children living there. Furthermore, the matron complained that there were no proper bathing facilities in the institution to wash the children and no proper facilities for washing and drying their clothes. Matron asked the authority to intervene to make the nursery more comfortable for both children and nurses.

- 29.72 In February 1949, Alice Litster inspected Stranorlar county home. At the time of inspection, 27 unmarried mothers and 44 children were living there. Eighteen infants aged between one month and two years were housed in the nursery. Miss Litster reported that the nursery was a large room on the ground floor which had 'a stuffy atmosphere on entering'. It contained 18 wooden cots, with wooden slats, straw mattresses and adequate blankets. She noted that babies slept in the nursery at night, but breastfed infants were taken to a dormitory on the second floor occupied by their mothers. Two mothers slept in the babies' dormitory by night. Commenting on the health of the infants, Miss Litster noted that all but four appeared to be in good health. Two infants were described as 'not thriving', one as 'delicate' and the fourth was 'suspected to be mentally deficient'. Six children aged between three weeks and 13 years were housed in the maternity ward.
- 29.73 Miss Litster encountered the remaining 20 children, aged between 13 months and 13 years, in 'the Hut', a long wooden structure in the yard. She stated that the hut was heated by a centrally placed stove, was 'stuffy and unpleasant' and carried 'a strong odour of humanity'. Among this group, two boys aged 12 and 13 years were classed as 'mental defectives' and just two children were assessed as being suitable for boarding out. With regard to the remaining children Miss Litster noted that some were suffering from scabies; some could not, or made no attempt to, stand or walk; one suffered a prolapsed rectum; two were deemed to be mentally defective; two were returned by foster parents citing their 'dirty habits'; two were admitted by the NSPCC in a 'neglected condition'. The remaining children were reportedly 'not healthy-looking children'. Miss Litster noted that there was no sanitary accommodation attached to the nursery or hut and that enamel chamber pots were kept there for the children's use. The older children were bathed in a

bathroom off the women's day room supplied by hot water from the laundry. Babies were bathed in the nursery. All children took their meals in the nursery and were fed five times a day as follows:

Breakfast	8.30am:	Tea with bread and butter, or milk with bread and butter.
Lunch	11.00am:	Milk (half pint). Cod liver oil is given at this time
Dinner	12.20pm:	Mashed potatoes and mincemeat. Soup (made with vegetables-carrots, turnips, parsnips, as in season and available, and barley).
Tea	3.00pm:	Tea, Bread and butter.
Supper	6.00pm:	Porridge and milk, or bread and milk.

- 29.74 Miss Litster observed that, on Fridays, children were given eggs, hard boiled and chopped through mashed potatoes, with egg salad and tea. No milk pudding except corn flour was given to infants starting to take solids. No fruit was given as part of the diet.
- 29.75 A report on 'illegitimate' children in Stranorlar county home, which appears to have been written by Miss Litster and informed by the county medical officer Dr Gormley, stated that in the period 1 April 1945 to 17 February 1949, 45 children were born in the home and a further 11 were admitted after birth; 'making a total of 55'. However, the indoor registers for the home recorded 210 births and 48 infant admissions over the same period. Furthermore, Dr Gormley stated that eight infant fatalities occurred in this period giving an infant mortality rate of about 14%. However, the institutional records recorded 48 infant deaths in the same period: an infant mortality rate of 23%. Details relating to the causes of infant deaths contained in the report are also suspect: in every case Dr Gormley gave the cause of death as 'weakness from birth'. The Department of Health informed Dr Gormley that these could not be accepted as 'certified causes of death'. Dr Gormley expressed his willingness to give 'more exact details' 'if requested to do so officially'.
- 29.76 On 31 March 1949, the Donegal public assistance authority reported that 216 people were living in Stranorlar county home including 22 unmarried mothers. There were 46 children living in the home; all but three were 'illegitimate'. Most children ranged in age from newborn to five years old. Six children were between five and 15 years old. The public assistance authority reported that, at the time of

inspection, the institution was not overcrowded and was adequately staffed by two nuns, four nurses, two wardsmen, a cook, porter and ambulance driver. The water supply, method of sewage disposal, laundry and kitchen facilities were reportedly 'good'. Sanitary arrangements, heating, and the general structure of the institution was said to be 'poor' and in need of improvement.

- 29.77 In August 1949, the Department of Health undertook a major programme of remedial and construction work at Stranorlar county home including the conversion of the old fever hospital into a new nursery. Other work undertaken included the replacement of doors and windows; plastering and distempering walls; fitting fireplaces in the mothers' ward; the installation of a bath, WC and hand basin in the children's ward and the installation of a wash hand basin in the labour ward.
- 29.78 In May 1950, the Department of Health inspected Stranorlar county home. The inspection report stated that accommodation for the unmarried mothers was of the 'usual dormitory' type with unplastered walls, uncovered ceilings and with no furniture other than beds. The children's accommodation was, according to the report, 'extremely crude' with unplastered walls, uncovered ceilings and no furniture other than wooden cots. The women's dining room was 'very bad' and the worst that the inspectors had seen in any institution. It noted that walls were unplastered, ceilings were rough and that there was 'a general atmosphere of gloom' made worse by overcrowding. The inspector also noted that unmarried women had no day room to avail of in the institution and 'seem to occupy themselves throughout the wards and other parts of the institution'. The inspector noted that the old fever hospital located behind the main institution was being renovated to accommodate unmarried mothers and children. This work was not completed until January 1952.
- 29.79 In July 1952, Miss Litster inspected Stranorlar. At the time of inspection, 26 single mothers (including six pregnant mothers) and 36 'illegitimate' children, aged from newborn to seven years, were living there. Miss Litster noted that the children were now housed in a new nursery on the site of the old fever hospital and that nursing and pregnant mothers had accommodation there also. She described the dormitory for nursing mothers as 'a bright airy room' containing six beds with fibre mattresses. She noted that the room was 'clean, fresh and comfortable' and that separate lockers were provided for all beds. Miss Litster noted that babies did not sleep in this dormitory.

29.80 Miss Litster reported that the dormitory for pregnant mothers was also 'a bright airy room' containing six beds with Dunlopillo mattresses and with a locker beside each bed. It had a bathroom attached and a large press for coats. The post-natal ward contained four beds. At the time of inspection there was one occupant, the mother of a day old 'illegitimate' infant. By day, children were accommodated in a dining room equipped with an Aga cooker and milk in a pantry covered in enamel pails. Miss Litster noted that the nurse in charge prepared food there for bottle-fed babies. The other side of this room contained a playroom which she described as 'a somewhat dark room'. Miss Litster inspected nine children in the dining room. She noted that five 'appear healthy' and that the others were either 'delicate', or 'mentally defective'. In one case, she noted 'the child does not speak'.

29.81 The first floor of the new nursery contained 22 wooden and aluminium cots. Behind a screen at one end of the room there were three children with chicken pox. The room was 'bright and airy', lit by seven windows and floored with linoleum. It was heated by an open turf fire. A bathroom and WC were adjacent. There were 21 children aged between three months and three years living there at the time of inspection. Miss Litster reported that most children were in good health. She described the dormitory for older children as being 'a bright and airy room' with wooden cots with mattresses. The room was lit by seven windows and had a bathroom and a WC adjacent. She noted that there was no fire escape from the first floor of the nursery and that there were no fire extinguishers on the landings or in the rooms. The children received five meals a day as follows:

7.30 a.m.	tea (milky); bread and butter.
10 a.m.	milk; bread and butter.
1 p.m. dinner.	Mashed potatoes with butter mixed through; a little meat; milk to drink. Soup - vegetable soup made with meat and carrots, turnips, etc. as in season. No pudding is given. Fruit does not appear on diet sheet.
3.30 p.m.	Milk or tea, bread, and butter.
6 p.m.	Porridge and milk. Eggs occasionally i.e., about once or twice weekly. These are not on dietary scale and are signed for by the Medical Officer.

The bottle-fed babies get either cows' milk or Cow and Gate food. Routine daily doses of Cod Liver Oil to each child.

29.82 Miss Litster reported that, in the period 1 April 1951 to 31 March 1952, 36 'illegitimate' children were either born or admitted to the institution and 11 'illegitimate' children died there over the same period; this was an infant mortality rate of 30%. These figures correspond with the institutional records. On this occasion, the medical officer supplied more detailed causes of death as follows:

<b>Age at Death</b>	<b>Date of Death</b>	<b>Cause of Death</b>
3 weeks	18/06/1951	Prematurity
2 months	30/07/1951	Marasmus
2 months	11/08/1951	Marasmus
1 day	08/10/1951	Cerebral Haemorrhage
4 months	03/10/1951	Myocardiac degeneration
5 days	16/12/1951	Cerebral Haemorrhage
1 day	07/01/1952	Congenital Heart Disease
1 week	25/01/1952	Sclerema
6 weeks	05/02/1952	Cerebral Convulsions
3 days	18/02/1952	Inter-cranial Haemorrhage
5 weeks	25/02/1952	Purpura Fulminans

29.83 Miss Litster commented:

Of the eleven infants who died, nine were born in the Institution and two were admitted from outside. The death rate shown is high. It is to be hoped that the better conditions and equipment of the new Children's Home will be reflected in a lower death rate. It is pleasant to see the bright attractive quarters now provided for mothers and children. Sanitary and bathing accommodation are now adequate; cots and beds comfortable; cooking facilities good. A trained nurse is in charge of the maternity unit and children's quarters.

29.84 Miss Litster noted that single pregnant women in their first pregnancy were not routinely sent to an extern approved maternity home as a matter of routine, but that some were sent to Sligo county home.

29.85 Miss Litster reported that only pregnant and nursing mothers slept in the maternity and children's units and that mothers of babies who were not breast-fed and mothers of older children 'sleep in the main body of the County Home and work there'. Miss Litster stated that these women were allowed 'no freedom of access

to their children' and were only allowed to visit them on their day off (Sunday) and were afforded 'special visits' if the child was ill. The county home administrators rationalised this stance by claiming that more frequent visits 'caused disruption to routine' and resulted in 'quarrelling and a general upsetting of the children'.

29.86 Miss Litster commented:

There is under this system no fostering of affection for and interest in their children. On the other hand, if we have nothing to offer the mother eventually but complete separation from her child, it is perhaps kinder to avoid the growth of affection. Nevertheless, we may have to consider whether or not the loss of maternal care may have some share in the mounting death rate.

29.87 In March 1953, the Donegal general purposes committee and county home visiting committee met to discuss the Department of Health *White Paper on the reconstruction and improvement of County Homes*. The committee members agreed with the department's recommendations to provide improved accommodation for the aged and infirm in Stranorlar county home and agreed that the cost involved was justified. However, committee members did not agree with the department's recommendation that the Donegal public assistance authority should provide new separate accommodation for unmarried mothers and children outside the county home setting. Committee members argued that unmarried mothers and children were housed in a separate building (the old fever hospital) and that accommodation for such classes had been 'recently and substantially improved'.

29.88 In 1954, the Donegal public assistance authority drew up an estimate of future bed accommodation for Stranorlar county home. The report made provision for beds for the chronic sick, ambulant residents and casual patients, but made no provision for unmarried mothers and children. Under the heading 'Classes at present in the Home and who are to be accommodated elsewhere in future', it was noted that unmarried mothers and children were still being admitted to the home but gave no indication as to where they would be accommodated in the future.

29.89 When the Department of Health made inquiries regarding plans for the future provision of accommodation for unmarried mothers in Donegal the matron of Stranorlar county home replied that she could not countenance the removal of unmarried mothers from the institution as she would not be able to procure female

attendants to replace them. The department enquired if unmarried mothers 'mixed with other inmates' or if they were completely segregated. The department was informed that unmarried mothers mixed with all other inmates as they worked in the different departments of the institution. The Department of Health accepted this arrangement on the basis that it would not interfere with the development of the home as a hospital for the chronic sick.

29.90 In June 1958, the Department of Health Inspector, Miss Margaret Reidy, visited Stranorlar. At the time of this inspection there were 20 children, aged between one month and ten years, living in the institution; 17 were listed as 'illegitimate' children. Every 'illegitimate' child was to be 'boarded out at a later date' and Miss Reidy noted that all were in good health. Two children, aged 11 months and one year, were unaccompanied. A family of four 'legitimate' children were living in the institution because their mother was a 'mental defective'. Another was there because her mother was in a mental hospital. One unaccompanied child was described as a 'Mongol', but no arrangements had been made to admit him to a 'special home'. A nine-month old girl, deserted by both parents because she suffered from infantile eczema, was in the home unaccompanied. The remaining 'legitimate' children were accompanied by their mothers who were admitted because they were destitute. The matron told Miss Reidy that adoptions could be arranged for children in America, but proceedings could not be instituted due to 'a Government objection' to foreign adoptions of children from county homes.

29.91 The Department of Health wrote to the health authority:

I am directed by the Minister for Health to state that it appears from a report furnished by an officer of this Department that at the time of her inspection of children in the County Home, Stranorlar, in June 1958, that there were 20 children in the Home, 7 at least of whom were of a suitable age for boarding out. The Minister cannot too strongly deprecate the retention of children in County Homes beyond the age of 12 months and he would urge that the Health Authority should make every effort to secure foster homes for children over the age of 12 months who are suitable for boarding out. It would be appreciated if you would state what steps are being taken to secure more appropriate accommodation for [named child] who, it is understood, is mentally defective. I am to draw attention to this Department's Circular No.7/52 of 20/01/1952 relating to the scheme for the improvement of County Homes and to point out that it is an integral part of any scheme for

improvement of these Institutions that children should not be accommodated in them.

29.92 The draft of the response also included the following on the subject of American adoptions:

The Officer reports that the Matron of the Home stated that adoptions could be arranged for some of the children in America, but that because of a Government objection, proceedings could not be instituted. In this connection, I am to point out that the powers and duties of a Health Authority in relation to a child who comes under their care are set out in sections 54, 55, and 56 of the Health Act, 1953. The Minister is, in fact, advised that a Health Authority has no power to send any child abroad or to act as an agency for such purpose because in so acting it would be acting ultra vires. Because, however, of the peculiar relationship of a Health Authority to children under its care, deriving from the general obligation to seek, consistent with the moral welfare of the children, to bring about their material and social advancement, the Minister would see no objection to a Health Authority's co-operating with a responsible person (not being a member of the Health Authority's staff) or appropriate charitable organization to the extent of passing on to such person or organization any requests which might be received from abroad for a child for adoption and later handing over any child to such person or organization or a representative of such person or organization at any appropriate place in the State when it had satisfied itself;

(1)By the production of a formal consent, on the lines of the forms of "consent to adoption" present in the Adoption Act, 1952, Rules, 1953 (S.I. No. 104 of 1953) to the removal of a child out of the State, that it (the Health Authority) was not a party to an infringement of section 40 of 'the Adoption Act, 1952; and

(2)That, where necessary (e.g. in the case of a child going to the U.S.A.), a passport in respect of the child had been obtained from the Department of External Affairs.

29.93 This part of the draft response was not included in the actual response issued. A handwritten note relating to the above letter stated:

I think that it would be better not to convey officially the information regarding children going to U.S.A. but the Inspector of Boarded out Children might write to the Children's Officer stating that she understood that there was some

misunderstanding about the matter in certain areas, including Donegal, and giving the information in the lines of this draft.

- 29.94 In February 1959, the secretary, Donegal County Council sent a report to the Department of Health regarding children in Stranorlar county home. He acknowledged that 20 children were living in the institution during Miss Reidy's inspection but stated that all but eight had been transferred elsewhere: five were boarded out and the others were taken by relatives. The secretary stated that eleven other children had been admitted to the home in the intervening period. Most were there for short stays because their mothers were incapacitated or in hospital and the others were either mentally or physically compromised and awaiting placement in specialist institutions.
- 29.95 In October 1959, Miss Reidy inspected Stranorlar. There was one single mother and six children there at the time. Three of the children were 'illegitimate': an infant girl accompanied by her mother; a three-year-old unaccompanied boy 'suitable for boarding out' and a two-year-old girl with deformed feet waiting admission to Our Lady's Hospital, Crumlin. All three 'legitimate' children were unaccompanied. Miss Reidy concluded by stating that the standard of childcare in the institution 'is not as good as it is in the majority of County Homes'. She noted that 56 children had been discharged since June 1958. Their exit pathways were as follows: Home with parent or relative, 58%; boarded out, 13%; placed for adoption, 12%; transferred to an 'approved school', 10% and transferred to a special hospital/institution, 7%.
- 29.96 Miss Reidy next inspected Stranorlar in October 1960. There was only one single mother and her ten-month-old infant living there. The woman was on the 'paid staff' of the hospital. A 21-month-old girl recorded in Miss Reidy's previous inspection was still there unaccompanied and awaiting placement in a foster home. Two other children were described as 'congenitally abnormal' four-year-old twins awaiting admission to a 'special institution'. Miss Reidy observed:
- Since my last inspection of the 29th October 1959, five unmarried mothers were delivered in the institution (one stillbirth - a multiple birth). There were no neo natal or infant deaths. Midwifery is discontinued here now. The children had been moved from the maternity block to the main building. They are in what was originally the children's nursery before they transferred to the maternity block. This nursery is a large room with a large window facing

south east. The window, however, is very high and the children would not get much sunshine. At the time of inspection - between 3 and 4 in the afternoon - the unit was very untidy. Matron's excuse was that they had the Stations of the Cross that day and it had disorganized normal routine. I had discussions with the County Secretary, the M.O. to the institution, Dr Mulryan, and the Children's Officer, Miss McElwaine.

- 29.97 Miss Reidy reported that 25 children were discharged from the home between 1 November 1959 and 31 October 1960, as follows: Taken home by parent or other relative, 52%; placed for adoption, 16%; transferred to an 'approved school', 16%; boarded out, 8%; transferred to a 'special institution', 4% and transferred to 'a new foster home', 4%.

### **Anecdotal evidence**

- 29.98 The HSE provided the Commission with a draft booklet about Stranorlar county home. The booklet was compiled in the 1990s and contained interviews with former staff members and a woman who had lived in the home as an unmarried mother. In the introduction, a former matron of the institution, when it was known as St Joseph's Hospital, wrote:

I was acutely aware of the legacy of the County Home, some of which transferred negatively to the newer St Joseph's Hospital when built. When I say negatively, I should explain that this was because of the difficult conditions and hard times, which had been so much a part of the County Home experience, and this could not be shaken off easily. The County Home was envisaged as a 'no hope' or 'last resort' place and did not sit well with anyone who remembered it. Nor should it I suppose...Many who passed through the County Home had no one to care for them in their time of need and sadly some remained there until their dying day only to be buried in the unmarked graveyard behind what is now St Joseph's Hospital.

### **Extracts from an interview with 'Fran'**

- 29.99 I went into the County Home [Stranorlar] in 1951 or 1952 when I was 16 years old. I was expecting a child. I did not mind going at the time because my own people did not want me. In those days it was a crime for anything like that to be wrong with you, so I was actually glad to get away. To me it was home, it was a roof and a bite of meat and when I was in that situation you were happy to get that. I had a

tough upbringing and it did not hit me hard but if you were from a well to do family and had plenty, it would have been tough.

- 29.100 You were given chores so you knew what you had to do and you were told you would be going to the laundry and at that time there were big tin baths and all the dirty nappies and all the dirty sheets from the hospital. My job was sluicing them at a quarter to seven in the morning under the cold tap outside before breakfast. Breakfast consisted of porridge, tea in an enamel mug and bread. Then off you went to the laundry and you washed clothes in big baths, and they were put into machines, two old fashioned type machines and one old fashioned spinner. There were dryers in the back where the clothes were dried.
- 29.101 Any of the girls who had children went up to the nursery, fed the children, changed them and put them to bed. My job in the morning was to help the nurses to put up the babies bottles and make the cots. I might get up at 6.30 am. I went to bed around 10 pm at night. In the morning, before you went to the laundry, you went to get your bucket and scrubber, cloth and Licel and went off to the body of the house where you scrubbed the wards on your knees. The floors were scrubbed three days a week. When the wards were done the bathrooms and toilets had to be scrubbed. On Wednesdays, large wooden commodes were carried downstairs to the yard and washed. It was different batches of girls for different things, you knew your routine and you got on with it.
- 29.102 We were generally happy I suppose. We used to have a good laugh. There would be great excitement when one of the girls would go off to have her baby and you were dying to know what it was. When a new girl came in you were dying to find out all about her. I used to listen to the wireless and dance to it. I was mad about dancing. Every Saturday night when Céilí House was on the wireless we danced with the nurses. So it was things like that we used to look forward to. The nurses were very nice.
- 29.103 One day I was scrubbing a dormitory and I was getting pains. I told one of the sisters and she told me 'Oh scrub away, you'll be grand, it will help you'. So, I scrubbed until I could scrub no longer. They took me up to the nursery and put me into a big bath. I was in the nursery all evening. The baby died but I never got to see where it was buried. That was me. I could go free, but I would not go home

because I was treated so badly there, so I was kept on as a staff member in the home. I worked in the hospital and was getting a wee bit of money.

29.104 In my estimation, they were good to the patients in the home but the facilities weren't there for them...It was sad when the wee babies were put on these wee pots and they would have been sitting on them for hours and they were fed with spoons by some of the girls. What used to sicken me the most was that when big gentry would come in to adopt a baby...They would never have picked my child if he had been in there. If he had lived, I would never have let him be taken away. I always said I would have stayed in until he was man big before I would have let him away. But I suppose at the end of the day, what was for girls? And that is the way it was in those days, which did not make it right but that just was the way it was...The mothers at that stage did not have much choice. They had to stay in the home until the child was boarded out. Often their parents did not want them home, to have nothing to do with them. The mothers would work and then be put on the staff and get a wee bit of money to keep their child and there was so much taken off them for their keep. There were some children there until they were nine or ten years old; ones that would never have been adopted. I wouldn't run down the home. It was home to so many people and times were very hard for everybody.

**Extract from an interview with 'Kitty' (presumed to be an ex staff member)**

29.105 There was a big eight or nine foot gate at the entrance. The ambulance driver's house was on the right next to a vegetable garden tended by an old inmate. Then there was the Stranorlar Registrar's Births, Deaths and Marriages office. Through the front porch the porter's quarters were on the right and across from it was the County engineer's office. The County Medical Officer was housed there also. Up a staircase was the Board of Assistance boardroom, county council offices and the chief clerk's office.

29.106 The women would have scrubbed the floors, worked in the laundry and in the kitchen. The men looked after the potatoes and the donkey and cart. The donkey and cart would have taken coffins up to the graveyard. A carpenter was employed to make coffins. The council men would have dug the grave. A new cemetery was opened in the 1950s. There were plenty of rats around. The only entertainment the patients had was the Strabane Brass Band who came up the Sunday after Christmas and entertained them. That was all the entertainment they had - once a year.

**Extract from an interview with 'Josie'; staff member 1938-43**

29.107 In 1938, it was quite grim, but there was terrible poverty in the area, and nobody expected a lot. The young unmarried mothers and the wives of travelling people had their babies there. The unmarried mothers came in quite early in their pregnancy, they had to work, to do tasks, scrub floors and other little bits and bobs. They had no very heavy tasks, but it kept them going and gave them something to do and when their children arrived there was a night nursery and a day nursery. The day nursery was a long hut where the kiddies could play when they were old enough to do so. Others went to school if they were not boarded out. They went to school in Stranorlar. It was tough on the mothers when the children were taken away eventually and boarded out. It was always sad because the mother could have been there for five or six years with the child and she grew to love it and it was an awful break to lose a child at that stage.

29.108 There were only two nurses and the nuns. We were paid six pounds, thirteen shillings and four pence, which was the going rate. We were always on the move and at that time we only had electric light until midnight so after that when we were laying out the dead or delivering a new baby, you did it by candlelight. I can't remember anybody being refused entry into the home - it was the place for them or otherwise they would have been on the side of the roads and in those days a lot of people did sleep on the side of the roads. Dr Gormley and the senior nurse kept the register and the books were filled in as each birth or death came in. Dr Gormley would sail in singing. A grand old soul. He had a wonderful way with them.

**Extract from an interview with 'Maura'; staff member 1958**

29.109 There was no heating, only a log fire. A couple of domestics worked in the home, mainly unmarried mothers...The unmarried mothers did most of the work. At that time, it was the destitute and unmarried mothers that made up the County Home and those creatures they scrubbed floors until they actually went into labour...The men and women were always kept completely separate. When the women went over to scrub the men's side one of us had to go to supervise to make sure there was no hanky panky. A Stranorlar resident bought two televisions for the home and that was just great. We really did appreciate that.

**Extract from interview with Sr Stanislaus; staff member, 1940s**

- 29.110 Looking back the conditions were atrocious. Sr Ignatius became Matron in 1944. Now she certainly did a lot to try and improve the conditions there. I remember we would have up to 60 kids and about 26 cots for them. The babies would be in the cots during the day. Their mothers would take them up to the top nursery to sleep with them by night. Now the big kids were put into the cots at night and in the morning had to sit on the floor to make room for the babies. The Army hut was the only place that the kids had to go during the day. There were no proper nappies for the children. When Sr Ignatius took over, she gave me four nappies for each child. I thought that was the most wonderful day. There were no training potties or anything until the nursery was rehoused in the old infirmary. I got the carpenter to make seats with holes in them so that we were able to start training those kids.
- 29.111 Some of the unmarried mothers might have been in three or four months before the baby would have been born depending on what had happened at home. If they had been put out [of their home] or if they were working, they would have to leave their employment. Some of them may not have come in until about a week before they were due. If their parents took them home, they had to take the baby with them, but if not, the girls would have to wait until their child was boarded out or placed with foster parents, which would have been two or three years. There was no such thing as adoption. The children had no toys and they craved attention. I begged and made six pounds and we used the money to buy a rocking horse for the children. I begged another six pounds to buy a pedal horse for the older children. But you know those kids, I could have kept them quiet all day by telling them that if they were bold, they would not get a ride on the horse.
- 29.112 But I also remember one thing about unmarried mothers. When I first went there, until the baby was born, they had to wear a shawl going to mass. I thought that was the hardest thing and people outside used to come into mass and they all knew how many pregnant girls were in the County Home and that used to kill me... There was a stigma about the County Home clothes. They were rough looking and only a certain make...I got the seamstress to make a skirt for each of the girls who were pregnant. They could wear their own clothes after the baby was born.