

**Report of the Confidential Committee
to the
Commission of Investigation into
Mother and Baby Homes
October 2020**



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Introduction

The Commission's Terms of Reference required it to establish a Confidential Committee to provide a forum for people who were formerly resident in the institutions under investigation or who worked in these institutions during the relevant period 'to provide accounts of their experience in these institutions in writing or orally as informally as is possible in the circumstances'.

The Confidential Committee was required to

- (a) operate under the direction of and be accountable to the Commission;
- (b) provide in its procedures for individuals who wished to have their identity remain confidential during the conduct of the Commission and its subsequent reporting; and
- (c) produce a report of a general nature on the experiences of the single women and children.

The Commission was established in February 2015. The first hearings of the Confidential Committee were held in June 2015 but it was September 2015 before it was fully in operation. This was because staff had to be recruited; procurement processes had to be put in place for services such as advertising and IT; and arrangements had to be made for the payment of expenses to witnesses while maintaining strict confidentiality.

The Commission appointed Ms Lucy Scaife and Mr Kevin Healy as members of the Confidential Committee. They were assisted by Commission researchers Ms Roni Buckley, Ms Meg McMahon, Ms Sarah Lea and Ms Maeve DeSay. Ms Nóra Ní Dhomhnaill was appointed as Witness Support Officer.

Training

The Commission organised training for the committee members and the staff who were dealing with the former residents. The Commission is grateful for the assistance of Ms Norah Gibbons¹ who had been a member of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (the Ryan Commission) and of the Acknowledgement

¹ Regrettably, Ms Gibbons died in April 2020 RIP.

Forum of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry in Northern Ireland.² All staff members who were likely to interact with witnesses, for example, reception staff, were included in the training. The major emphasis was on preserving the confidentiality of the witnesses and ensuring that they were comfortable and had a satisfactory experience.

Advertising

After a tendering process, an advertising campaign was conducted in June/July 2015 in national and local press and local radio. A commission representative gave a number of interviews on local radio stations encouraging relevant people to come forward. Further advertising and media interviews took place in June 2016 after the Commission had chosen the representative sample of county homes. Information was provided to Irish organisations in the UK and the USA. Information leaflets and posters were provided to doctors' surgeries, the constituency offices of TDs and to the Irish Country Women's Association and all information was later available on the Commission's website.

Contacting the Confidential Committee

A dedicated Freephone number to call the Confidential Committee team was installed. This was the main way that people contacted the Committee although some used the email service which was available on the Commission's website and some got in touch by post. Some people contacted the Commission to express a desire to give evidence but thought that they were ineligible as they did not have any complaints. They were assured that the committee wanted to hear all the available evidence and was not confined to hearing complaints.

An information leaflet about the Confidential Committee was drawn up and provided to anyone who made an inquiry. This set out in detail exactly what the Confidential Committee could and could not do. A hard copy of the Commission's Terms of Reference was provided to anyone who requested it.

The commitments made by the Confidential Committee

The information leaflet explained the role of the Confidential Committee as follows:

² The Acknowledgement Forum had a broadly similar role to the Ryan Commission Confidential Committee <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/rpt/03-01.php> and the MBHCOI Confidential Committee. Its report is at: <https://www.hia inquiry.org/sites/hia inquiry/files/media-files/Vol%2010%20-%20Acknowledgement%20Forum%20Report.pdf>

The main purpose of the Confidential Committee is to listen to the experiences of those who have spent time in Mother and Baby Homes. These can include mothers, children, nuns, workers, occasional workers (e.g. delivery men, painters etc.) and visitors to the home.

Applicants were told that the hearing before the committee would be heard in private and that the committee:

may be suitable for you if you wish to have your experiences heard in a sympathetic atmosphere by experienced people and you do not want any person or institution to know that you are giving evidence to the Commission. The evidence you give will not be open to challenge.

The leaflet set out the core commitments of the Confidential Committee:

- We will treat everybody equally whatever their circumstances, age, disability, race, religion, beliefs, sexual orientation or civil status.
- We will listen to you and support you in telling us about your experiences.
- We will give you time to tell us your experiences.
- We will understand if you get upset when describing your experiences.
- We will not judge you.
- We will be honest with you about what we can and cannot do.
- We promise you will remain anonymous, even when we bring your experiences to public attention so that they can be understood and acknowledged by all.

Reports to the Authorities

The leaflet explained that no report on anything a person told the Confidential Committee would be made to the authorities except if the Committee had reason to believe that:

- A serious crime had been committed;
- A serious risk to a person's life existed; or
- Abuse of a child was ongoing.

It was explained that, in any of those situations, the Committee would be obliged to report the matter to the Gardaí or to the Child and Family Agency (Tusla). In fact a small number of reports were made.

What the Confidential Committee could not do

It was clearly explained that

- Neither the Confidential Committee nor the Commission itself could award redress or compensation;
- Neither the Confidential Committee nor the Commission itself could assist an individual in tracing relatives.

It was also explained that the Commission would not provide counselling but would provide a list of counselling sources if this was requested.

Applying to the Committee

Everyone who expressed a wish to speak to the Confidential Committee was issued with an application form. Some people requested that the form be sent to an address other than their home address and this was done. The application form asked for basic information about the person such as name, date of birth, contact details, the institution(s) in which they were resident, the years in which they were resident, how they wished to be contacted by the Commission (phone, email, post) and whether or not they wished to be accompanied at the hearing. They were also asked if they would need any special assistance because of, for example, problems with hearing, mobility or serious health problems.

It was made clear that all this information would be dealt with on a strictly confidential basis. Anyone who had a problem with the form could call the Freephone number.

Every witness who wanted to give evidence was facilitated. In November 2016, the Commission announced that the closing date for applications to speak to the Confidential Committee was 1 March 2017. In practice, the Commission did not enforce this deadline and continued to accept applications beyond that time and heard witnesses up to February 2020.

Organising the Confidential Committee meetings

All arrangements with the witnesses were made by the Witness Support Officer. She made the arrangements for the hearings, assisted with travel arrangements for the witnesses where required and organised the payment of expenses.

The majority of the witnesses were seen in the Commission's offices. Meetings were also held in Birmingham, Carlow, Cavan, Cork, Donegal, Dublin, Galway, Kilkenny, Laois, Leitrim, Limerick, London, Manchester, Meath, Monaghan, Offaly, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary, Waterford, Westmeath, Wexford and Wicklow. Those witnesses who said they would have difficulty travelling were seen in their own homes while others were met in disability accessible premises. A number of hearings were conducted electronically, in particular with USA residents. Some people who could not come to the committee submitted letters.

Confidentiality was rigidly adhered to in all these arrangements. All staff and all service providers in the Commission's office had signed confidentiality contracts (this included the Commission members). The arrangements for meetings were made in such a way as to ensure that witnesses did not meet each other. Hotels which were booked for hearings were booked in the name of a staff member and the name of the Commission did not appear in any public area.

Many of the witnesses were particularly concerned about maintaining confidentiality and specifically asked that their names not be known outside the Confidential Committee. As is clear from the report, many witnesses had never discussed their experiences with any other person; this included witnesses who had not told family members such as their husbands and/or their other (now adult) children. A few who were in this position subsequently told the Confidential Committee researcher that their experience at the Confidential Committee had given them the courage to go home and tell family members.

Arrangements were put in place to enable the Commission pay expenses to witnesses who came to the Confidential Committee. The officially preferred method of payment - electronic funds transfer - was not suitable for many of the people for a number of reasons, the most important of which was the need to maintain their confidentiality. It took some considerable time to get approval to open a bank account in the Commission's name and to get a cheque book. This was eventually issued in September 2015. Witnesses and persons accompanying them were reimbursed their reasonable expenses. In some cases, this included overnight stays in hotels which, again, were booked in the name of a staff member. The name of the person receiving expenses was known only to the Witness Support Officer and the second cheque signatory (either the researcher who had met the person or the Commission's solicitor or director; neither the solicitor nor the director met the people involved).

Numbers

A total of 886 people who seemed to be within the Commission's remit contacted the Commission and were sent information about the Confidential Committee. (Ten others also contacted the Commission but they had been resident in county homes which the Commission was not investigating.) The vast majority were resident in Ireland; 12% were resident in the UK and 3% in the USA with a small number in other countries. Of these, 673 completed the application form; 19 gave evidence to the Commission and not to the Confidential Committee and 550 met the Confidential Committee. Some people who met the Confidential Committee also gave evidence to the Commission. The 104 who completed the application form but did not meet the Confidential Committee were offered appointments but, for various reasons, did not take up the offer.

One of the 550 people who met the Confidential Committee was not in one of the scheduled institutions and so was outside the Terms of Reference. Of the 549 who were within the terms, 304 were resident as mothers; 228 were resident as babies/children and 17 were involved in other ways.

The mothers came from 12 different institutions; the children also from 12 different institutions but not the same 12 as the mothers. A small number of the mothers and children had been in more than one of the institutions. The 17 others were associated with seven different institutions.

The vast majority of the mothers who met the Confidential Committee entered the institutions between 1960 and 1989; not surprisingly, there was no one from the 1920s or 1930s and very few (five) from the 1940s. There were 13 from the 1950s and 13 from the 1990s. Virtually all were over the age of 45 when they met the Committee with almost 60% being over the age of 60.

The vast majority of the former child residents who gave evidence were in the institutions in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. There was one from the 1920s, eight from the 1930s, 14 from the 1970s and four from the 1980s.

How the hearings were conducted

At each hearing, there was one member of the Confidential Committee and one researcher. The researcher took notes of the hearing. Applicants could be accompanied by any adult of their choosing other than a person who was planning to

speak to the Confidential Committee or give evidence to the Commission. It was explained that the reason for this was 'to protect both individuals and the process, from allegations that each has been influenced in what they say by hearing the account given by the other'. Applicants could be accompanied by a legal advisor if they wished but the Commission would not cover the legal costs.

Witnesses were asked for permission to record their evidence on the clear understanding that the recordings would be used only as an aide memoire for the researcher when compiling the report and would then be destroyed. All such recordings were destroyed after the report was added to the Confidential Committee electronic repository of information.

The committee member asked questions in order to elicit further information but did not ever challenge the account given. There was no investigative questioning and no challenge or disbelief expressed. This was the case even when it was absolutely clear that the person's recollection was incorrect, for example, a witness who was in a small institution talked about the large number of babies there or a witness who named a particular person as being involved many years before that person actually worked in the institution. Some brought prepared statements and/or documentation. These were copied and the originals returned.

The length of the meetings varied considerably. Witnesses were given as much time as they wanted. They were offered refreshments and breaks.

Some witnesses contacted the Commission offices after their hearing because they remembered something else that they wanted to say. These calls were taken by the Witness Support Officer or the researchers who had been present at the hearing and the person's record was amended accordingly.

The information gathered by the Confidential Committee

An electronic repository of information was set up to record the information provided by witnesses to the Confidential Committee. This repository contains the application form of the witness and the account of the experiences described by the witness to the committee. The Commission proposes to redact the names and other identifying information before submitting this repository as part of the Commission's archives to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth unless the particular witness wants the name retained. The person's full story is retained in this process.

Information about witnesses who came to the Committee was not accessible by anyone other than the Committee members, the researchers assisting them and the Witness Support Officer. Other staff, including the Commission members, did not have access. A number of witnesses to the Confidential Committee subsequently gave evidence to the full Commission. In these cases, the witnesses were asked for permission to allow the full Commission to see the Confidential Committee records. This permission was given in all cases.

The information gathered in this way was used to compile the Confidential Committee Report. This report is a compilation of what the witnesses told the Confidential Committee. It is expressed largely in the words used by the individual themselves. It does not identify the witnesses or the institutions involved.

Limitations of this report

This report outlines the experiences of those who chose to recount their experiences. They are not a representative sample of the residents of the institutions under investigation. The Commission has no doubt that the witnesses recounted their experiences as honestly as possible. However, the Commission does have concerns about the contamination of some evidence. A number of witnesses gave evidence that was clearly incorrect. This contamination probably occurred because of meetings with other residents and inaccurate media coverage.

Circumstances of Pregnancy and Admission

1940s

To begin with the 1940s: a witness born in a mother and baby home late in that decade, told the Confidential Committee that she discovered it was her birthmother's parents, her grandparents, having discovered that their daughter had been raped on her way home from school, who had put her into the home - and at one month old, she herself had been transferred from this Home into an orphanage.

The father of this next witness died when she was four years old, and her mother placed her and some others of her six siblings into an industrial school. When she left it, her mother had a domestic job arranged for her, which she started. Then at the age of 18, she developed a relationship and became pregnant - not divulging this to the birthfather or to anyone. However, when her employer noticed her condition, the local priest was told and arranged for her to enter a mother and baby home.

Four years later, the witness again became pregnant - with the father of the first child - but on this occasion her mother reported this to the Gardaí, who brought the witness in front of a judge. This judge 'demanded' to know who the father was, saying, the witness told the Committee: 'You'd better answer me now or I'll put you away where nobody will see you again'. The witness said she was transferred from the court to another home and then to yet another: back to where she had stayed during her first pregnancy.

Meanwhile a witness born in 1948 recounted that as a 'boarded out' child in early life, she suffered 'horrific' sexual and physical abuse until the age of 12 and was then sent to an industrial school. When she was 18 years old, she met her birthmother, to learn that never having revealed to the witness's father that she had had a child for him previously, she married him and went on to have nine more children. The reason for her deception, she told her daughter, was her fear that a revelation of the witness's existence 'would break up the family'.

This story was partially replicated when the witness herself married a man from a 'staunch Irish Catholic family' keeping from him for some time that she was 'illegitimate'. When she did tell him the truth it 'changed his view of her': 'He thought less of me and the marriage changed entirely'.

1950s

During the 1950s a 16-year old suffered rape, the perpetrator was a man with whom she went for a drink following an encounter with him. 'He must have put something in my drink, next thing I remember I was standing up and brushing myself off'. At the time she was working for a family and when it emerged that she was pregnant, it was this family who organised her entry to a mother and baby home where, she said, she was 'treated well'. (She had been fostered and believes she may have herself been born in a home.)

It was in the same era that a 22-year-old woman became pregnant with a man who worked nearby. 'He would pass the house every evening and we would have the chats - I was bold, I suppose!' It was her mother who noticed the pregnancy and she was sent to a neighbour's house while her brother arranged for her to go to a mother and baby home and drove her there. She had no say in the arrangements and never told the 'father' that he was one.

Another witness said her birthmother had lived in a 'two-roomed thatched cottage' and when she was eight months' pregnant, the witness's grandparents, who were 'supportive' of their daughter, drove her to the mother and baby home in a pony and trap. 'Unfortunately', the witness told the committee, they did not have the money to help their daughter keep the witness although, she said, her birthfather did pay £100 to the home. He was told it was for 'baby clothes'.

A pony and trap also featured in the story of another witness some years later in this decade. This man came to tell not just his own story but that of his birthmother, who, he told the Committee, was 11 years old when she was raped by a family member in the 1950s and became pregnant with him. She too was brought by horsepower to a mother and baby home to give birth and had remained with him in the home, he said,

until she was 16 years old, to be placed then in another institution while he was 'boarded out', sadly to suffer (along with another 'boarder') many beatings and sexual abuse at the hands of their 'boarded-out father'.

Three generations, three single mothers - it was in the mid-1950s that a witness, born in a mother and baby home, was later told by her mother that she had become pregnant having been raped by a priest. She said to the Committee that her own mother, the witness's grandmother, had also been born to an 'unmarried mother'.

When she was just 15 years old, this next witness told the Committee, she was returning home from a funfair when 'a boy of 17 or 18 years old grabbed me and had sex with me'. She said she had thought this was like 'kiss and chase' and didn't question it at the time as 'that happened regularly to lots of other girls'. In school, however, the nun 'noticed' her, called her mother in and she was taken to see a doctor, having 'no idea' for what reason - and not being privy to the conversation, didn't realise that the doctor's verdict was that she was seven months' pregnant. When this was repeated to her, the witness told the Committee she didn't understand what that meant - and when it was explained, she could not figure out how it had happened.

But soon, the parish priest was called to the house and after his visit, the witness was 'bundled' into the van of a local man who drove her, with her father, straight to the mother and baby home. (She had an aunt who was a nun and now believes that this nun had been involved in the arrangements.) All she knew, she said to the Committee, was that she had been 'plucked' out of her family and had never returned. 'Whenever I would come back to Ireland from the UK, I wasn't allowed to return home. I couldn't be seen'.

That 15-year old was not the only witness to testify that she had been entirely ignorant in sexual matters before falling pregnant. It wasn't until she was reading an article in a magazine that a 17-year old of that era was made aware of the facts of life - and having digested the article, thought she might be pregnant. She explained to the Committee that a local boy had 'forced himself' on her and when she went to him to break the news, his response was that if she was 'up the spout' she could 'go to the UK'.

Instead, she wrote to an aunt in the UK asking for help but her mother found out and it was she who confronted the birthfather who denied everything. A local priest came into the picture, organising accommodation for this girl in a hostel but a short time later

she was 'just told' she was going to a mother and baby home. In the meantime, her parents took the birthfather to court to claim for the loss of her earnings and to 'get him' for what he did, but they lost the case and had to pay costs. They also paid 30 shillings a week to the home for her keep and continued to pay after she left. She 'carried that guilt for years'.

An 18-year old who had spent most of her childhood in a convent, became pregnant after a casual encounter with a man she met at a carnival. She too was uneducated in matters of sex and seven months after that encounter it was an aunt who noticed she might be 'expecting'. As before, this witness did not know what the word meant - but the aunt brought her to a doctor who confirmed the pregnancy, recommending that she be sent to a mother and baby home. It was the aunt, with the brother of the witness, who drove her to the home.

In the last year of that decade, a woman sent to a mother and baby home at the age of 16, became pregnant by an older, married man (who, when he found out, wanted her to go to the UK.) Her mother had noticed she was pregnant, however, her mother died when the witness was eight months pregnant. The day after she died, a priest arranged for an ambulance to take the witness to a mother and baby home. After giving birth, she remained in the mother and baby home for four years and was then sent into another institution for the following nine years. This woman did trace her son - eventually - discovering that he had grown up in an industrial school.

1960s

Ignorance in matters of sex continued into the 1960s, with witnesses stating that girls and women were continuing to become pregnant without realising how or why. It happened to one witness, 15 years old, while she was staying with a relative in the UK. She told the Committee that she did suspect at the time that 'what I was doing with my boyfriend wasn't right'.

She split up with this boyfriend and returned home but when she told her mother about her condition, 'my bag was packed and I was run out of the house'. She went back to the UK but a priest 'became involved' and the witness was returned to Ireland. A nun

collected her at a railway station to escort her to a mother and baby home, where, she said, on admission her clothes were removed, her hair was cut, and she was told: 'You're here for your sins'.

Then there was the 17-year old who grew up in industrial schools and 'had never seen a pregnant person. She told the Committee that she had had no idea what sex was, had never had any education about it and didn't realise she was pregnant (from her boyfriend of that time, two years older than she was) until almost the end of her pregnancy. She was working as a live-in 'domestic' at the time and it was this girl's employer who recognised her condition and who put her into a mother and baby home where she was, she said to the Committee, 'very frightened and ashamed'.

Many of these witnesses had been moved in and out of the different parts of the Irish care system throughout their younger lives. One who had been in a mother and baby home in 1960 to have her baby, had herself been born 20 years earlier in a mother and baby home and had been raised in foster care.

Now working, she and an older man had become friends; he would give her lifts home from work - and they had gone to the cinema together on occasion. One evening, however, he drove her down a laneway and raped her. She told no-one, she said to the Committee: 'Nobody would believe me anyway'. She had no idea she was pregnant until she saw a letter her boss's wife had left open, in which she had written of her suspicions that this was the case and it turned out she was five months 'gone'.

When she told the birthfather, he initially said he would 'do the right thing by her' but then vanished. She sought advice from her parish priest. He initially wanted to go with her to meet the birthfather with the intention of 'negotiating for the right thing' but then he himself started acting inappropriately, making a pass at her, telling her 'he wished it was his baby so he could look after her'. He also said to her that the birthfather had told him she 'had been with multiple men'.

She threatened suicide and her foster mother called for the help of another local priest. His intervention, however, was to roundly berate her for even thinking of harming herself or her baby and it was he who made arrangements for her admission to a mother and baby home, to which she was taken by ambulance. After her daughter's birth, she initially tried to keep her, and did for some time but then had to return to the

mother and baby home sometime after the birth as she couldn't cope without support. Her daughter was eventually adopted to the USA.

Another witness, born in the UK, became pregnant with an Irish boyfriend who was working there. He abandoned her on hearing the news, leaving her a letter saying he was moving back home to Ireland. She followed him and on disembarking the ferry, with no money and nowhere to go, a young man saw her dilemma and his 'kind' family took her in. She eventually secured a job and a flat along with another girl - and was put in touch with a professional woman. This woman offered her a live-in job in her house and also said she would help her when her baby was born. There were priests involved now, one brought her to stay in a mother and baby home where she gave birth to her son.

True to her promise, the women who had offered the witness a job came to visit her after the birth and confirmed her offer of a home and a job but the witness told her that the nuns in the mother and baby home would not allow this, insisting that her only option was to send her son for adoption either in Ireland or the USA. She opted for the USA because she felt her son would have a better life there.

One witness came for interview to give voice to her birthmother, now deceased, who had been born in a mother and baby home and raised in foster care. At the age of 19, this birthmother had been training to be a nurse - and in a relationship - when she became pregnant. She and her boyfriend intended to marry, but one night when she was due to meet him, a social worker turned up instead, and brought her directly to a Magdalen laundry.

Her mother, said this witness, went with this social worker because she assumed that because she had been raised in foster care, there was an entitlement by this state official, as she saw it, to move her involuntarily. The next day she was transferred from the laundry to a mother and baby home, where she had her baby and from there, he too, was taken to the USA. He was 20 months old.

This next disclosure was equally difficult to hear. A witness who went into a Home in 1964 at the age of 23, told the Committee that she had been abused by her father for many years after her mother had died. She then met a boy, and thought if she could have a baby with someone, she 'would have her own life'. However, when her father discovered she was

pregnant, he gave her 'the hiding of her life', wrapped cardboard around her stomach and forbade her to be 'seen outside'. A local priest made arrangements with this father for his daughter to go into the mother and baby home.

These accounts were also given:

- The first witness had been working in a summer job and took a lift in a car with a group of local boys. Two of them raped her.
- A girl spent her first six years in a children's home before she was fostered. She suffered rape at the hands of her foster father in the early 1960s and at the age of 16, was eight months' pregnant when a priest arrived at her school and brought her to a mother and baby home. She had had no idea she was pregnant.
- Next is a witness who had been sexually abused by her father. She had been placed in an institution at the age of two - and was also placed in psychiatric care for a short time. As an adult, she came to the Committee to describe how at the age of 16, she went to a dance, became drunk, and having accepted the offer of a lift home, passed out in the car. She woke to find herself in a barn, being raped by the driver; his friend was with him but she managed to run away before he too could attack.
- A 16-year old was raped by a local man who had dragged her into a field. She did not tell anyone about it at the time but her pregnancy was noticed by the woman for whom she was doing domestic work, and the witness did then tell her grandfather what had happened. Her family, however, felt they would be ostracised in their neighbourhood if they reported the rape because the perpetrator was a successful farmer.

For the remainder of her pregnancy, this 16-year old spent most of her time hidden in a bedroom in her home. She was taken away by ambulance when her waters broke - being returned to the mother and baby home in which she had been born 16 years previously - and later, when friends and neighbours missed her in the area and asked where she was, they were told by her family she had been sent away to work.

- When another witness, 19 years old, became pregnant within a relationship, she told her mother and stepfather - the latter having an 'important' job. His reaction was that she 'needed to get rid of the baby as it might ruin his career'. The reaction of the boyfriend, father of the baby, was one of distress - not for his girlfriend but for his own mother as she was a widow and this 'would break her heart'.

When the witness gave birth to her son, he was taken for adoption and her mother collected her from the mother and baby home, took her to the airport to go to an aunt and uncle in the UK, and warned her, 'not to come back'.

- Meanwhile, a witness who had been born in a mother and baby home during this decade, came to offer the Committee the story of her birthmother who had been raped by a local boy. Although her mother had been 18 years old when this happened, she had been, according to what she told the witness, yet another who had been 'very innocent' about the facts of life, 'we were green, I suppose', she had said.

On discovering she was pregnant, she had disclosed it to her grandfather - who had consulted a priest - whose first call had been to strongly urge the grandfather to 'get her to marry' the perpetrator. This grandfather said 'no' and held to that decision. Sadly, he died shortly afterwards and the grandmother couldn't cope. The priest came on a Sunday. 'I had no bag', her birthmother had said to the witness, 'just a brown paper parcel tied with twine and that was the way I was brought to the mother and baby home'.

- A witness (24 years old but like so many others of that era, not having much knowledge of sex) went to see her GP to find out what was going on in her body. He phoned the parish priest from his surgery and she was taken straight to the mother and baby home as she would be a 'dreadful example to her siblings'.
- Another witness told the Committee she had 'no knowledge of sex or what it might be'. She became pregnant at 19 with a man from her town who was seven years older than she was. The local doctor who had made this discovery, informed the witness's mother, saying: 'You'll have to shift her out of here', so the parish priest was telephoned and it was he who summoned an ambulance to bring her to the mother and baby home.

Then there was a witness who, at the age of 16, had been in a relationship with the birthfather for a year discovered that she was pregnant only when she was seven months into it. She told her boyfriend, who told his mother, who was friendly with the local priest.

Both sets of parents, with the witness, went together to meet the priest in his house. She told the Committee that he examined her internally, taking 45 minutes about it, saying that he 'needed to establish whether (she) had been sexually active for a while' - because if she had, he said, she 'would not be accepted into a mother and baby home'.

According to this witness, her mother called her 'a prostitute and a whore'. Three of her uncles were priests and her parents were worried about how her pregnancy would affect them. Both sets of parents were also very concerned, she said, about how 'an unmarried pregnancy' would affect the careers of the witness's brothers: 'Everyone was being thought of but me'.

As an indication of how desperate some women became in seeking solutions to the problems they faced when finding themselves pregnant in Ireland 'out of wedlock' - and how sexually naïve so many were even into their 20s - one 20-year old witness who found out she was expecting twins because she had 'fallen by the wayside with a casual encounter' told the Committee that she wrote to the Problem Page of a well-known magazine seeking advice and help from the 'Agony Aunt'.

Another witness told the Committee that at the age of 22 she became pregnant, having just finished nursing training and having been in a relationship with a married, older man since she was 15 years old. She decided she wanted to keep the child and went to see a doctor, who referred her to a priest, who put her in touch with a second priest who belonged to an adoption society. 'This', she said to the Committee, 'was where the entrapment started'.

With its involvement, it was arranged to send the witness to a home, with an assurance that it was a private nursing home for 'a better class of girl'; but on arrival and seeing not a private nursing home but a large mother and baby home, she said to herself: 'Abandon all hope when you enter here!' She described it as 'a madhouse'. She outlined the extreme lengths to which she then went to ensure her son would not be adopted, including placing him in a children's home 'until she could get back on her feet'. She later discovered, however, that despite her best efforts, he had been 'taken' without her knowledge or consent and she is still engaged, she told the Committee, 'in a lifelong battle' to discover how this came about and who was responsible.

As seen already, the Committee heard many accounts of women and girls who became pregnant because of deep, sex-related ignorance. One witness was 21 years old when she became pregnant with a doctor of foreign origin. He, however, was not allowed to stay in Ireland and had to go back to his own country. So while the witness's father threatened to 'send the IRA after him' it was her mother who arranged for her reception into a mother and baby home.

Another witness said that she was just 15 years old when she became pregnant for the first time - and again for a second time following numerous rapes she suffered from a family member who, she confessed to the Committee, had been 'badly' abusing her from when she was just 13 years old. When she told her family and the local priest of her first pregnancy, she was accused of 'trying to break up a family' and that it was 'her own fault'. Her father, she said, would 'try to sell me to any auld lad in the pub'. When in the mother and baby home she told the nuns about the abuse, 'they wouldn't listen to me'. Following the birth of her first child, she went to stay with an uncle who did inform the Gardaí about the abuse, but again, she said, 'nothing happened'. When she returned to her own home, she was 'badly beaten' and the abuse resumed.

Her second pregnancy - again from being raped by the same relative - resulted in another round of being 'badly beaten' by her father 'who wanted to kill the baby'. This didn't happen and she was sent to another mother and baby home from where she was sent to a hospital for the birth. (She was so ill and weak from the most recent beating, she said she was kept in this hospital for three weeks after giving birth, before being discharged back to the mother and baby home.)

This witness professed herself as 'happy' in both mother and baby homes because she felt 'safe' and she was reluctant to leave. Having been released, she did try 'many

times' to kill herself. Eventually, this witness emigrated to the United States where she lived for 20 years; back home, her first child was raised by her parents, the second child (she was told by the nuns in the second home) died.

The Committee heard a similar story from another witness, raped twice and becoming pregnant after both; the first was perpetrated by a neighbour, the second by a man with whom she went to a dance. When her father learned of the first pregnancy, 'he took out the leather'. On hearing of the second pregnancy, the family 'kicked me out and I was told never to come back'. Her admission to the mother and baby home was organised by the local priest, along with the doctor and her mother and like some others in similar circumstances, she described it as 'a refuge' and said she could not fault it at the time. This women's children were adopted and she herself moved to the UK.

1970s

A woman, concerned with her birthmother's history and plight, said that at the time of her conception in the early 1970s, her birthmother was resident in a psychiatric institution. She said she had spent 22 years consulting with solicitors, detectives and journalists, trying to find out how this could have happened.

However, in the midst of all the grief, suffering and loss reported to the Confidential Committee there were reports from some witnesses who said that they did find succour in the mother and baby homes and did go on to have decent, happy lives.

One such witness, 21 years old on finding herself pregnant by her boyfriend in the 1970s, phoned an adoption organisation for help and was given the names of two mother and baby homes. The nun who answered the phone in the first one she telephoned told her to 'come straight away'.

This witness, like a few others, came to the Committee because she wanted to offer a positive story, using the word 'refuge' (a designation along with 'sanctuary' and 'haven')

all employed by witnesses to describe homes which they considered provided solace.) It became clear that for many of them, this mother and baby home offered escape from terrible conditions at home. The father of this witness's child had been her boyfriend since she was 15 years of age. They went on to have another child, the witness said to the Committee; they later married, and are still happily so.

A witness, whose parents had both died when she was very young, was living with her aunt and uncle - she became pregnant following abuse by her uncle. One of her colleagues in the bar where she worked noticed her condition and brought her to a doctor - who contacted the sister of the witness and when she returned home that evening, she found her bags packed for her entry to the mother and baby home. She has never spoken to her sister since she found out that it had been her sister who had not only organised the mother and baby home but, she claimed that it was she who had also signed the papers authorising the adoption of her child.

Another witness told the Committee that her difficulties arose when she was 19 years of age and had become 'enthralled' by an older man. She became pregnant with him after their 'first and only' sexual encounter. This time, the family GP was 'nice' to her, referring her to an adoption agency. For six months, she remained 'terrified' of disclosing her pregnancy to her parents for fear of stressing them and in the meantime, the birthfather had disappeared from her life but not before revealing to her that he had impregnated other women before her. The plans she was making with an adoption agency to go to a mother and baby home were progressing when her worst fears were realised: the GP telephoned her mother to tell her what was afoot.

A witness met a man at a dance and was with him for a year when she became pregnant. She had been abused by her father and brother on a regular basis and was, she said, 'looking for an adult figure, and someone to love' her. She had planned to go to the UK with her boyfriend but on the day they were to travel, he told her there was 'only one ticket for the boat'. This witness said she was in denial about being pregnant but one day, on coming home from visiting her mother who was sick in hospital, found an ambulance waiting to collect her to go to a mother and baby home. She refused to get into it. At work, a colleague offered to help her but, 'rigid with terror' she would not accept and she now thinks that it was her mother who made the arrangements. Eventually, she was taken to a mother and baby home - and to add to her fears, had to field a visit from the Gardaí there; they told her they were 'making enquiries' about the birthfather. 'However,' she said, 'nothing came of that'.

It was in the early 1970s that a witness who had been a patient in a psychiatric hospital 'for about five or six weeks' discovered when she came out, that she was pregnant. 'I don't remember much about the hospital,' she said, 'but I have discovered I was found in a male patient's bed. I had been given electro-shock treatment and the drug, largactil', and having been found in that other patient's bed, she told the Committee, hospital staff put her 'in a 'straitjacket in a padded room'. This witness gave birth in a mother and baby home but her baby died 11 days later - and much later, she applied for and got her medical records from the psychiatric hospital in which she saw that the psychiatrist who had treated her had described her as a 'sexual deviant'. 'I was a 16-year old girl. Who calls a 16-year old girl a sexual deviant?'

Many witnesses did say that when they sought (or accepted) help, they could find it, whether in the mother and baby homes or elsewhere. One, for instance, told the Committee that 'some religious organisation' (the Quakers, she thought) had been instrumental in helping her to keep her child.

Some extracts from witness accounts:

- 'I was treated like a second-class citizen by my family; society had an obsession with hiding everything.'
- 'Nobody will want you now!' Said by the mother of a witness, 14-years old when her sister 'informed' on her, having noticed she was pregnant. The witness was then kept out of sight upstairs.
- Another witness was also 'hidden away at home' until arrangements were made to transfer her to a mother and baby home; a social worker driving her there, early in the morning, took the back roads so as not to be recognised'.
- A 28-year old woman, separated from her husband and living with her four-year old child in her parents' home, dated a man for one night and became pregnant. Her parents were 'very ashamed' when they found out - and called a priest. The priest, she told the Committee, 'then forced her to swear an affidavit' that the child was not her husband's. She was kept at home, hidden away and forbidden to speak, even to her child; she was not allowed to reply if the child spoke to her. Concerned about their reputation

for respectability, her parents were afraid that neighbours might hear her voice and she was kept in hiding until she was eight months' pregnant, then transferred to a home.

- 'Get her put away!' From the father of a 19-year old, who had divulged her pregnancy to her mother.
- The birthfather of another witness's child was, she told the Committee, from 'the wrong side of town' and as soon as he found out [that she was pregnant] he ran. This witness's mother encouraged her to telephone his parents to tell them that she had lost the baby, while her aunts, who were nuns, became involved in her being sent to a mother and baby home. While in the home, 'unbeknownst' to her, she said, arrangements were made for her to be sent from the mother and baby home to the USA where she 'came under the wing' of a doctor until the birth and subsequent adoption of her child there.
- This from a further witness, another who was pregnant from rape: 'I was at a party when a man came in and put his hand over my mouth and raped me. I closed down completely', she told the Committee. 'I knew I would never marry. I could never give myself to anyone'.
- This from a witness born in a mother and baby home who was quoting her birthmother: 'the birthfather tried to abort the baby (the witness) with pills, vodka and a coat-hanger'.
- 'It was like giving away a packet of crisps -' from a witness who had, at 15 years old, become pregnant while she was involved with a man in his 50s. Having given birth to her son in a mother and baby home, she gave him up for adoption. This girl, homeless and living on the streets a year later, was raped - and finding herself pregnant again, went back to the same mother and baby home. She told the Committee that this time, she had 'more understanding' and left the home after six months, and forgoing adoption, took her baby with her.
- A 17-year old, who had grown up in state care, was raped and fell pregnant in the early 1970s while working in the UK. She told her sister with whom

she was living. This sister contacted an adoption agency and a trio, two men and a woman, arrived at their flat to take her - with another woman - back to Ireland. On the ferry, they assigned a number and a new name to her and when the ferry docked, the man waiting for them there drove both women to a mother and baby home.

In the mid 1970s, a 19-year old, who had been in a relationship for two years with the only son of a farmer, told the Committee that they wanted to get married but when it was discovered she was pregnant, 'the local priest, she said, 'wouldn't allow it', and she was placed in a mother and baby home. This woman became pregnant twice more to the same man and herself made arrangements to go back to the mother and baby home as her boyfriend 'would never acknowledge the circumstances'. All three of their children having been adopted, she remained in the relationship with this man for nine years, but then married another man, had five children with him and together they raised all five in their family home.

In 1974 a 20-year old woman, having been gang-raped in a park, was found by a man who brought her to the Gardaí. She was placed in a cell overnight and freed the following morning, having not been questioned. Living back on the streets, she was in extreme pain and thought she was going to die. A woman, finding her 'praying for her sins' in a church (because she believed the rape had been her fault) recognising her distress and degree of pain, brought her to a hospital where it was confirmed she was pregnant and her transfer to a mother and baby home was arranged. The birth was very traumatic but not just for her, she told the Committee, because the baby was born with the cord around its neck and did not survive.

A year later, 1975, a 20-year woman became pregnant, also as a result of rape, this time by a fellow-resident in the digs where they both lived. She did have a boyfriend at the time but had been afraid to reveal to him how her pregnancy had happened - she hadn't reported it to authorities because she had felt 'so ashamed'. Knowing he had never had sex with her and that the baby couldn't be his, her boyfriend ended the relationship. When her parents discovered her pregnancy, they were so upset by the whole situation, they refused to talk to her. A priest came to the house and then brought her to a mother and baby home.

Serious and serial abuse was described by this next witness. It was the late 1970s when at 17 years old, she became pregnant while in an 'abusive relationship' with a local boy - having been sexually abused by her father. She had been put into care - where she was also abused. Her mother had 'kicked her out' on discovering that she was pregnant, and she had been sleeping rough when the Gardaí picked her up and recognising her situation, told her she needed to go to a mother and baby home. She hated the home and remains 'extremely angry 'about her time there and her treatment by the nuns'.

A girl, whose alcoholic mother died by suicide when she was only 11 years old, was raised by grandparents who were horrified to find that when she was 14 years old (knowing 'nothing' she told the Committee, 'about sex or relationships') she was seven months pregnant with a local boy. 'When this was realised,' she said, they were 'furious' with her and 'deeply ashamed' and it was a social worker who drove her to a mother and baby home, 'not speaking a word to her during the entire journey'.

Real terror was felt by young women when they discovered they were pregnant 'out of wedlock'. For instance this 17-year old who had 'no knowledge of sex,' feared that her boyfriend 'would lose interest in her if she didn't give him what he wanted', had sex with him and finding she was pregnant, told the Committee that her first thought was: 'I'll have to get rid of it'. To that end, in the hope that she would miscarry, she took hot baths and when that didn't work, threw herself down the stairs of a department store, which didn't work either. She confided in her mother, and was told she could no longer stay in the family home and she was sent to a mother and baby home.

There were consequences for a 19-year old, walked home from a staff Christmas party by a colleague 'to make sure (she) got home safely,' but who subsequently raped her after another party held in her home. He had been the 'last to leave' her party and the rape took place in the context of his claim that she 'owed him for keeping her safe after the previous party'. Fearing she would be blamed and be 'looked down' on as 'a tramp' - she didn't report the rape. The worst happened and suspecting she might be pregnant, she went to a doctor, who confirmed she was. She did tell him how it had happened. His response: 'What was wrong with you, you're a big girl. Could you not have fought him off?' Her parents were distraught, her sister was angry: 'Shame on you, look at what you've done to Daddy!' and her

father's edict was that she could never bring 'it' home and that 'no-one was ever to know about 'it'. She told the Committee she was 'locked away' if visitors came to the house and was not allowed to go outside. She was so upset about all of this, she said, she cut off 'all her hair'. The witness's brother drove her to the mother and baby home, after the intervention of a priest.

Brought to hospital after an accident, an 18-year old was discovered to be pregnant. She had been in a relationship with a man, who had left for work abroad. Her mother was informed of this unexpected development and contacted a priest, who from then on, visited the witness regularly in hospital, telling her she had to have the baby adopted to 'avoid causing embarrassment' to her family.

She told the Committee she believes it was this priest who arranged, with her mother, for her to be taken by ambulance directly from this hospital where she was being treated for her injuries, to a mother and baby home and when she arrived, she was physically examined by two members of staff 'to check for diseases: girls like you could have anything'.

In the mid-1970s, a 23 year old woman when she conceived with her boyfriend said 'but he didn't want me then'. Her older sister decided it would be best for her 'and for the family' if she 'went away'. Her sister set about organising her admission to the chosen mother and baby home, and she and her husband drove the witness to the Home, instructing her firmly that she '*would* come back home *without* her baby'. The couple left her at the door of the mother and baby home and drove away. She was then met by two nuns. 'I began to cry. Sister [...] punched me in the back and said: 'You are here now and you will be here until you get rid of that child. You will be here again next year, you are only a prostitute anyway'.

In the 1970s a girl who was only 15 years old became pregnant with a man '10 or 15 years older' following a 'casual' encounter. She came from a very poor family where there were 14 children. She was living-in and working as a domestic in a convent at the time, and had 'no knowledge of sex or of where babies came from'.

The nuns, noticing her pregnancy, brought her to a doctor, and then took her home to her family on the understanding that she would be looked after there. However, her family organised that she should go immediately to a mother and baby home (where she was the youngest on the premises). When she arrived she had no clothes with her and the staff in the home did not give her any. The witness wrote to one of the nuns in the convent where she had been employed, asking for 'clothes and nightdresses'. She said, these kind nuns brought her 'lovely nightdresses'.

In the same decade, a woman, raped by an older man (she had thought he 'loved' her) 'blanked out' she said, what he had done to her. At four and a half months pregnant - not knowing this - she fainted. Her grandmother called the GP who confirmed a pregnancy. She said that her grandmother gave her a 'severe beating' and a few days later the witness found 'a packed brown suitcase' in the hallway and was taken to a mother and baby home, where, on arrival she was brought into an office and was told by nuns that she was there 'for her sins' and that she 'had to repent'. The birthfather said he would take her out of the home but did not.

In 1976, a woman who had become pregnant by a friend of her family, a wealthy farmer, 10 years her senior said her mother had been encouraging the liaison as it would bring 'status' to their family. Her mother had been 'ignoring' her complaints that 'this man was abusive and a drinker'. On discovering her daughter was pregnant, her mother brought her to an abortion clinic in the UK, although the witness was under the impression that she was merely seeing a doctor. When she realised the true purpose of the visit, she walked out, realising 'it was wrong'. For this insubordination, her mother 'beat her senseless' telling her: 'I will get it out of you one way or another'. Two days later, back home and by arrangement with a priest, the witness was driven by her mother and brother to a mother and baby home and she said that her father had never said 'Goodbye'.

A witness who went into a mother and baby home in the final years of the 1970s at the age of 17 years old, demonstrated how a few kind words can fuel resilience. She said that she had become pregnant by an older man for whom she babysat - and like so many others, did not understand what had happened to her. She spoke with the principal of her school (a nun) who was 'very supportive', encouraging her to complete her Leaving Cert before doing anything else, advising that she should remain at home.

This, it turned out, was not to be an option because after the witness told her parents she was pregnant, her mother wanted her 'out of the house'. The witness steeled herself to telephone one of the crisis pregnancy agencies, seeking advice and help. Even making this phone call took courage because, she told the Committee, she 'had to make sure' that no one in her remote town would find out. Help appropriate to her needs came her way, with an adoption society arranging for her to stay with a family far from home - a priest brought her there - and it was agreed that she should go into a mother and baby home to give birth.

At 22 years old, another witness who became pregnant with her boyfriend of six years went into the same mother and baby home. When she had told her parents of her pregnancy, they demanded she 'get rid of it' (while a priest 'roared and shouted' at her when they brought him to the house.) She took matters into her own hands and arranged to go into a mother and baby home, finding, she said, that 'they were very good' to her. The parents of this witness 'softened' once the baby was born - and eventually adopted the child as their own.

However, at the end of the decade, this next witness, who became pregnant in 1979 at the age of 22 years, following a one-night stand, encapsulated the position of women and girls within their families - even extended families - with the phrase: 'In those days you did what you were told'. When her father found out about the pregnancy, he stopped talking to her, despite their previous closeness, while both parents then informed the birthfather's parents who sent him abroad.

The catalyst for the witness came with a visit to their home by a friend of her sister who had also become pregnant 'out of wedlock'; the witness was not privy to the discussion but shortly afterwards, 'my suitcase was packed and put waiting for me in the hallway, and I was told I was going for a trip up the country', where the mother and baby home was, of course.

When she had her baby, and wanted to keep her, they sent the witness for psychiatric assessment as they could not comprehend why she would want to do that and when she refused to relent, they 'threw her out'. This story's end is even sadder because after three months of trying to organise some credible way to keep her daughter, she could not cope and 'reluctantly' went ahead with adoption, telling the Committee. 'You cannot live on love alone'.

1980s

A witness told the Confidential Committee that having had no sex education, she began 'secretly' dating a local boy when she was 16 years old. The relationship broke up but her mother, having noticed 'changes' in her, brought her to a doctor who confirmed she was six months pregnant. Mother and aunts, she said, 'took over' while she herself was 'oblivious' to what was going on in the background: 'I was in a bubble really, still going to school and acting normal. For survival purposes, I blocked out a lot'. She was staying with a friend while 'arrangements' were being made.

For the mother of this witness, history was repeating itself for she too had become pregnant when she was 16 years old. She was particularly anxious that the father of the witness learned nothing about their daughter's situation - he was an alcoholic and she feared his reaction, so he was told that his daughter wanted to become a nun and that the school was liaising with a convent in London for a three to four month exchange so she could figure out if she had a true vocation. The witness was 'dispatched' to the mother and baby home, and having had no discussion in advance about what would happen when she entered it, she went off thinking: 'It would all be sorted. The naivety!'

It was in the early 1980s that a 20-year old woman became pregnant with a man who sang with her in the church choir - it had been the first time she had sex and he had told her that it was his first time too and assured her that his family doctor had said a man 'couldn't impregnate a girl when it was his first time'. The woman's father had a high-profile job and he was concerned people would find out about his 'daughter's failings' and he blamed her when he didn't get a promotion. It was her mother who brought her to the mother and baby home.

This next witness had also become pregnant in the early part of this decade following rape by 'a group of men'. Although she was 25 years of age when this happened to her she had been she said, 'very sheltered' and was now 'very confused'. When she reported the rape to the Gardaí, the reaction was to give advice. 'We know the people involved', they said to her, telling her to 'stay away from them'. Although she told her father about the rape, 'he didn't believe me. Nobody believed me'. Her father dropped dead about six weeks later.

The witness told the Committee that her admission to a mother and baby home was organised by a neighbour, while her stepmother paid for it. This stepmother 'often asked me why I didn't have an abortion' and on one occasion when the witness phoned to ask her to come for a visit, 'she said she was too busy'.

This witness had been sexually abused by her music teacher for about two years when she was just 10 and 11 years old but had remained a virgin, still the case when, at 16 years of age in the early 1980s, she was raped by a 23-year old man after she got drunk at a party. Along with a baby, he gave her a 'very, very nasty STD'. She told the Committee that in addition to the rape being known in the mother and baby home, two hospitals knew about it too - and had to know that she'd been underage at the time, yet none of the three institutions reported the rape and no-one acknowledged to her that rape was a crime; as a result she felt it was not.

When a 29-year old witness was admitted to the mother and baby home in the mid-1980s, she described it as 'gorgeous'. Decades later she finally admitted to her 83-year old mother that she had given birth to a baby all those years ago, the mother's first question was: 'Who knows?'

A witness, who had been with her boyfriend since the age of 12 years, became pregnant when she was 15 years old. She kept this a secret, 'in denial and hoping it would work itself out' but her mother, noticing that she was sleeping a lot and had developed strange eating habits, took her to a GP who confirmed she was seven months pregnant, admonishing her with: 'Have you been a bold girl?'

On hearing the news, her father's reaction was: 'The little bitch kept it to herself for so long so we couldn't do anything about it'. The reaction of her school principal was that she could not return there because it would bring shame on the school, advising that the girl be sent to a different part of the country. The solution found was that a social worker would drive her to a mother and baby home.

During the 1980s, when a 15-year old schoolgirl discovered she was pregnant she was so terrified her parents would find out - 'they would have killed me and the baby, dead and buried!' - she contacted an agency and a social worker arranged for her to go to a mother and baby home 'for fear of

being seen'. She hadn't told her parents where she was going, they believed she had gone to England - and had filed a Missing Person's report with the Gardaí.

A witness opened her heart to the Committee, revealing how she felt at finding herself pregnant as a 19-year old 'and very immature at that' in the early 1980s: 'I didn't want a baby. Babies were for adults. I knew I was pregnant but my mind couldn't comprehend it. It was like an alien taking over my body'. Her family wanted the whole thing 'brushed under the carpet', she said, 'while her boyfriend's mother offered to convert their living room into a nursery. Despite the latter, her boyfriend, she said, wanted her to have an abortion as in: 'You can always have another baby but you can't have another me'.

When she continued to demur, he broke up with her, and via an agency, 'arrangements' were made, with a woman from that agency driving her to the mother and baby home. She has 'no recollection' of arriving there.

A student, pregnant from a rape at 20 years of age in the mid-1980s, did not report it ('where did you go with things like that in those days?') possibly because she did not realise she was pregnant until some months later when she went to her GP and got 'the biggest shock of my life'. Her university tutor and her manager, she said, were both 'completely supportive (and 'took over the whirlwind') organising her admission to a mother and baby home, but as an outpatient. 'It was like going over the edge'.

'She's gone on work experience down the country' was the excuse given by the family of a witness sent to a mother and baby home in 1980 having become pregnant with her boyfriend when she was just 14 years old. When she heard about the pregnancy, her mother was furious, she beat her daughter, brought her to a hospital to confirm the pregnancy and then drove her straight to the mother and baby home where she gave birth and had her child adopted. This witness got pregnant again two years after having her first baby adopted and on receiving this information the birthfather 'just disappeared'. This time she did not tell her family but contacted an organisation who supported people in situations like hers and it organised a private 'home stay' with a family. Her mother heard anyway and arrived to the home where she was staying to take her back to the mother and baby home. Despite this witness's full intention to keep this baby, after the birth she was left with no option or support but to let her too go for adoption.

A 16-year old, pregnant in the early 1980s with her boyfriend, told a priest, who told her mother. Her mother, father and a friend brought her straight to a mother and baby home. As a witness giving evidence to the Confidential Committee, she said: 'I was in shock. I had never been away from home', and then: 'The big door closed behind me'.

Sex education for an 18-year old in the early 1980s had been: 'I hope you don't let boys touch you'. The witness didn't realise she might be pregnant from her boyfriend until she burst her jeans while laughing. On learning of her condition, her mother forced her go to confession and she told the Committee that: 'all the priest wanted to know was, did I enjoy the sexual movement of him moving in and out of me'.

Despite all their travails and frequent reports of 'difficult' treatment in these mother and baby homes, many residents told the Committee that deep down they were relieved to get away from 'worse' situations at home':

'I had somewhere to go':

'I was grateful for some peace. When you're pregnant there's nothing on your mind but keeping yourself safe - (from a witness who appreciated getting away from a partner who was 'a heavy drinker and very violent'.)

'The mother and baby home was my saviour at a very hard time in my life: it gave me a chance to get used to being a mother. There were, and are, good people out there'.

A witness who went to a mother and baby home on her own initiative as an 18 year old, 'to save her parents' shame: I knew it was a home for girls in my situation and my own suggestion was that I would go away to hide the shame. The problem had gone away from my parents'.

From a woman who was 27 years old when she was in a relationship with a foreign national when she became pregnant. She told the Committee that she came from a house with many children and an alcoholic father, whose family received help from the St Vincent de Paul. She and her sister had been taken into care for a while - and when she returned home, she said she (deliberately) started sleeping with foreign nationals 'because their little bedsits were like hotels compared to my house. I wanted to get pregnant'. Inevitably, she did conceive, went to a social worker to get help and was

brought to meet 'a woman who helped unmarried mothers', who in turn brought her to a mother and baby home. 'It was a roof over my head which I needed. I felt ashamed. I think they took £5 from me when I arrived.

It was to an adoption agency that a 19-year old turned. Pregnant with her boyfriend, she found he had arranged for her to go to England for an abortion but she refused to go. With the help of the organisation, she went into a mother and baby home but like another witness above, has 'blanked out' her memories of her stay there because 'the experience was so painful'. What she does recall, memorably, is 'a feeling of enveloping darkness'. The adoption agency then organised it so she could leave the mother and baby home and she transferred into a different area to live with a family for the rest of her pregnancy.

In 1983, a 20-year old gave birth to a baby boy in a mother and baby home following a gang-rape. Some two years later she was again raped by one of the original gang and again became pregnant but was fearful to go to the Gardaí because this man had also stabbed her. Following advice from 'a local lady' to 'talk to the nuns' she sought refuge in a mother and baby home but told the Committee that these nuns neither enquired into her history nor why she was seeking help - but did inform her that she had to agree to adoption before they would accept her. She was admitted, but following the birth of her second son the witness became determined to keep him and despite early difficulties involving foster care placements, she persevered and eventually took her children to live with her in the UK.

A witness described to the Committee her 'very difficult' upbringing and said that in 1984, when she was 21 years old, she became pregnant. One of the major problems was that she had been with two men before discovering her situation and therefore wasn't sure which was the father. Instead of telling her parents, she went to an organisation that placed her with a host family first, and then organised it so she went to a mother and baby home. At 26 years of age, she again became pregnant when she was 'very messed up' and in poor health: she had lost her job and her flat at the time. She then went on to have a third child with the father of the second and all told, had resided in a number of mother and baby homes.

In 1985, a girl raised in state care, and now working as a cook in a boarding school, became pregnant after a 'casual encounter' with a local man two years older. When she told

him, he ordered her 'to get rid of the baby'. When she wouldn't agree, she told the Committee, 'he pushed me down the stairs in the hope I'd miscarry'. She didn't. She was sacked from her job, and arrangements were made for her to go to a mother and baby home.

This next witness gave the Committee a precis of how she became pregnant. Having 'gone with' a boy since she was 14 years old, she suspected she might be pregnant, but her GP (who did no tests) said she was 'fine...'. 'Reality hit' she said, when she started to get sick. Her mother and aunts took over (as has been seen in similar cases above) and brought her to a maternity hospital where it was confirmed she was five months' pregnant. The mother spoke with the school principal, who would not, despite pleas, let her remain to do her exams. This principal then addressed the pupils (with the witness present) about 'girls letting themselves go;' how they should be 'respecting their bodies;' and 'remaining pure'. Her mother then told her she was 'going down the country' with one of the aunts, who took her to a mother and baby home, 'it was just like going on a day out'.

Another witness who became pregnant in 1989 when she was 17, told how her mother used her 'contacts' around the country to 'sort' the situation and organise in advance for the baby to be adopted. She took the witness out of college (while still acting with her other children and the witness's father as though the witness was still a student) and organised her entry into a mother and baby home. Her mother continued the pretence with her father and siblings that she was still away studying.

Having had her child by C-section, the witness told the Committee, she was 'stiff and very sore' when she came home, this being explained to everyone by saying she had fallen off a horse. In her view, she said, her maternal instinct had been destroyed on the day she had to give up her son. She decided to be sterilised - and could not pick up a baby for 20 years thereafter. She married, and after her husband told her he wanted children they split up when it became clear there wouldn't be any.

She met her second husband and had explained to him at the outset that she couldn't have children. The witness later traced her son and at the time they met she had still not revealed his existence to her husband; when she did tell her husband, he was 'incredulous' on hearing about her son, asking how could she have done 'such a

selfish thing as give up a child?' She corrected him by saying that giving up her child was 'the most unselfish thing' she had ever done.

However, she did say to the Committee she very much regrets giving her son up and still resents her mother because of it - if she had kept her son, she thinks, she probably would have gone on to have more children. She also made the comment to the Committee that it was 'some kind of Karma' for her mother that neither she nor any of her siblings have children now, meaning that her mother has no grandchildren.

The parents of a 15-year old died when she was 14 years of age, and despite her relations doing their best to 'keep an eye' on her and her siblings, she became 'quite wayward'. She was impregnated by a man six years her senior, who then moved to the UK. A social worker came to the house and informed the witness she was going to a mother and baby home, admonishing her not to act 'like butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. The nuns will know what you're like'. An uncle drove her there and since she had never been anywhere but home, said 'it was like going to Spain'. Despite her young age and pressure to have her baby adopted, she persisted in her efforts not to go in that direction and managed to keep her child.

A social worker was involved in this next story too when a woman told the Committee she became pregnant at the age of 19 years with a boy 'who wanted no involvement'. Her parents, she said, 'went berserk' because they were concerned about what people would think' and about her father's social standing with his job in the community. The father brought in the local parish priest to talk to her; he 'ranted and raved' at her, told her that she was a sinner and no longer welcome in the church - and she believes it was he who made the arrangements for her to go to a mother and baby home, while it was a social worker who drove her there.

In 1985, when she was 18 years old, a witness became pregnant to an 'older guy' in the UK who was a member of the Church of England. Although she was sent to a home (her parents driving her there) they were 'largely supportive'. Her mother's initial response was to 'nearly to fall off her stool', while her father's was: 'Nobody died'. But within half an hour of her arrival, a nun who discovered this was to be a mixed-religion child, 'was on her knees to say a decade of the Rosary'.

This next witness, whose mother had been born in a mother and baby home in England while she herself had been raised in an industrial school, was 16 years old when she became pregnant by her boyfriend. He had a history of violence towards her and she finally left him because he had attacked her while taking drugs with some of his friends in the bedsit arranged for her by her social worker.

She contacted the social worker, emphasising to him that she wanted to keep her baby and his response was 'That's no problem. That's no problem at all'. He also told her, she said, of a place 'where she could live independently. They'll help you get an apartment and they'll help you with the likes of a carrycot and baby stuff. 'You'll be all right!' He made the arrangements, she travelled by train but when the train pulled into the destination station, standing on the platform was a nun 'and I knew straight away. I got a pain. I actually felt a weakness coming over me'.

This nun told her that the social worker had called ahead and was aware of her background: 'Sure you're one of our girls anyway, you're well able, you'll be grand. We'll get a little routine now, and you'll be grand'. 'I was conditioned to *yes sister no sister three bags full sister* and I was sitting there in the car while the nun drove and we got there and I saw it and I knew that the social worker had fucking lied to me'.

When an 18-year old woman told her boyfriend she was pregnant, his response was an unbelieving: 'sure you're on the pill, aren't you?' She had no idea what 'the pill' was and when they'd been having sex, he'd said to her: 'Don't worry, I'm shooting blanks, you can't get pregnant', which she didn't understand either. She went to a mother and baby home with the help of an adoption agency.

1990s

Then there was the witness who was 22 years old when she became pregnant in the early part of the 1990s with an older married man. When she told her adoptive parents, they refused to have her at home any longer; she felt this was a second abandonment and rejection and was 'hurt and angry' that they were sending her away.

Asked about the admission to the mother and baby home she said she hated it; her room was above the nursery and the cries of the babies upset her. (This witness told the Committee that two years later she again became pregnant having met another married man.)

It was also the early 1990s when a woman who was then 26 years old, got pregnant while having a relationship with a priest. Because of the pregnancy, she had to leave the town in which she grew up. 'I feel very stigmatised. There is a lot of pain around the fact that I was wrenched from my home - my emotional connection. When it became known to her family and the church that she was pregnant she went to live with her sister in a city, then made her own arrangements to go to a mother and baby home. The priest-father of her child brought her there. When her father died, she was warned not to come to his funeral.

Conditions in the homes

'I want people to know what went on in these institutions. The child is punished for what the mother did...'

The opening words of this section, above, were uttered by a woman during her interview with the Confidential Committee. She was born in one of these mother and baby homes during the 1950s, spent the first five years of her life there, and described conditions as 'horrific', saying that she had never had shoes, had slept in a bed with five other girls without pillows, sheets or blankets, (their bedding being old coats) and had been slapped by a nun for the crime of spilling milk from its container. She told the Committee that she had been sent to the gate of the institution to fetch it from a milkman but it had been snowing and her clothing was light. She was shivering so hard that some of it had spilled.

A witness recounted that during her time in the mother and baby home as a child she was destroyed from the cleaning products which afflicted her with 'terrible sores' on her skin. Witnesses reported that scrubbing of floors, stairs and steps (both as work task and punishment) had been imposed on residents from the 1950s into the 1970s in some mother and baby homes.

Some mothers reported having to do physically exhausting work up to the verge of giving birth, or very soon (as little as two or three days) immediately afterwards; one new mother gave an account of being shouted at and taunted while she was cleaning, post-birth stitches bursting, the cold stone of floor and staircase she had already cleaned now flooding with her blood.

Some referenced scrubbing as an inescapable part of their lives in the homes - saying that, while working, they were frequently and very closely supervised by a nun, some of whom would slap or punch them if they were judged not to be working hard or fast enough. Several witnesses from separate mother and baby homes told the Committee that the nun would deliberately 're-dirty' the cleaned surfaces. One related how she had just finished mopping a long corridor when the nun upended her bucket of dirty water and ordered: 'now clean it again!'

Some witnesses described that while working on their hands and knees, they were verbally abused about their status as 'fallen women'. Witnesses reported being called 'sinners' 'dirt' 'spawn of Satan' or worse. They related similar, sometimes identical stories from time spent in institutions where the type of work and living conditions, although based throughout the country in widely spaced geographical locations, seemed to be the same.

As seen above, the abuse described was not just verbal; some witnesses told of being slapped, beaten and punched, with nuns shouting at them that this was their penance for sinful behaviour. One witness came to the Committee to speak of her mid-1980s residency, testifying that she herself had not had a bad time in the mother and baby home, but had come to the Committee 'fighting for other women' who, like her, had been 'in the background, providing a beautiful service for those who couldn't have children'. During her contribution, she shared her opinion that children born in mother and baby homes had been 'like commodities' and that the nuns were 'like human traffickers'.

1930s

A witness born in a mother and baby home in this decade told of spending the first 'seven or eight' years of her life there. She came to the Committee with her story of childhood deprivation in this institution - no toys, no visitors, Christmas not celebrated, schoolteachers who 'didn't care about children from mother and baby homes and grouped them all together at the back of the class'. This woman was nevertheless accepting of her lot, including her classroom status, 'because there were so many of us [it meant] there was a type of safety. I didn't mind'. (Her birthmother, the Committee heard, had had to work in the home for a year after the birth to keep her there, 'otherwise,' the witness told the Committee, 'she would have had to pay a hundred pounds'.)

On the day she was fostered, this witness recalled being dressed in a new coat and also told the Committee that when she arrived at her foster home, she was so unfamiliar with 'being around men' she didn't speak for the first month.

Some years later, when she was '14 or 15 years old,' her foster mother told her she was being sent back to the home because she was 'becoming fond of boys'. In the end, though, she was sent, not to the mother and baby home but to a hospital run by the nuns; she worked there for the next 12 years, 'living in' (for instance having to 'sign out' should she wish temporarily to leave the precincts.) She did add that while the work was hard, the nuns were 'nice' to her and overall, contrary to what the Committee heard during some of its hearings, she characterised her eight years in the home as 'happy'; on the other hand, for her, foster-care was 'lonely'.

A woman, who was born, in the 1930s came to the Confidential Committee to say that she suspects the Birth Certificate she holds may relate to the wrong person and therefore, she has no idea what her exact date of birth is, or how old she is. She knows she was put into the home in 1938 where she remained for two years until transferred to an orphanage for the next eight years before being fostered at the age of 10.

A male witness came to relate his own story, starting when he was born in a mother and baby home at the beginning of this decade, 1931. He told the Confidential Committee that his birthmother had also been born - and raised into adulthood - in an institution from which she eventually ran away; but then, she had told her son, being 'inexperienced and not knowing where to go,' she had sought help from a Roman Catholic priest. She said the priest raped her.

The witness said that his mother then wrote to the Archbishop of her diocese to inform him of the assault, but the action that ensued was that she was brought back to the original care institution by Gardaí - and was then punished [by the nuns] for running away; this consisted of having her hair cut off. When it was discovered in that institution that she was pregnant, she was transferred by ambulance to the mother and baby home where the witness was born.

1940s

A witness born in a hospital in 1947 and then transferred to a mother and baby home wrote to the Committee, informing it of his memories of the home where he had stayed, without his mother, until he was six years of age. (He also wrote about his experiences

of being boarded out later on in this report.) His memories included repeated attempts to escape from the mother and baby home along with his pal. Here is what he wrote:

My memories are of my attempts to escape with my pal from the abuse we were suffering - every day we got out of the room, we climbed up, using the big iron gate, on to the big stone wall that surrounded the place, but the drop to the outside was too deep and we knew we would break our legs if we jumped down. We would try to get the attention of someone passing outside, but they would ignore us.

The caretaker would come with a ladder to bring us down and the nun would come, grab me by my left ear and drag me inside. I was then locked in to a dark room for a day, or sometimes two.

I was never sent to school.

I used to wet the bed at night, and every morning, the nun would hit me before she grabbed my left ear and dragged me to the wash basins. Sometimes I would trip and fall but she would continue to drag me by the ear. This left ear, he wrote, would regularly produce a discharge (otorrhea) an affliction that has persisted throughout his life: Doctors told me that my ear suffered permanent damage. If I get a cold I lose my hearing in my left ear.

It was almost impossible to get a night's sleep there as the nun was constantly coming in to the dormitory, shouting and roaring to get me and many other boys out of bed to go to the toilet. If the bed was wet already boys would be beaten there and then - there was near constant noise throughout the night with children crying. The nun would then be roaring at us to shut up and go to sleep.

I still have nightmares about the place and I wonder how they could be so cruel to little children in a religious country. I sometimes wake and think I'm back there.

I was not able to eat most of the food put in front of me and I regularly felt hungry - the food came out on a plate and what I left behind was brought out to me the next day again.

One woman, who had come to the mother and baby home at the age of 20 in 1949, had a generally 'good, if lonely', experience there. She described to the Committee

how 'the girls there were well fed' and how 'everything they needed was there'. Her work was in the kitchen, she said, 'making breakfast and dinner for the men, the farmers and priests working in and around the premises; 'You just had to work and keep your mouth closed'. She was, she said, very lonely, since she was not allowed to talk to anyone, and so was too afraid ever to do so. Nevertheless, she said, she had 'made a home' of her institution: 'I had nothing else and didn't know what was going to happen'.

There was another group, who also came to the Committee and whose memories leaned towards the positive: as categorised by one witness, these were the girls whose families could afford to pay for their residencies. Their stays in mother and baby homes (while being far from luxurious or easy) were by all accounts less punishment-prone or humiliating than those whose families could not pay and found themselves in the front line of fire.

This group of women had been 'put in' to shield them from society also to buffer their families against the prevailing 'fallen woman' and 'shame' stigmas. Based on many accounts of conditions in the homes, they received far more latitude than most residents.

What also became evident to the Committee was that while the prevailing culture in mother and baby homes all over the country was harsh, there were exceptions in some, where even in the early years they could be said to run a more forgiving regime than most of the others. (Even here, though, there were drawbacks, one witness's complaint was that when resident under one of these more benign regimes, she 'never saw meat, and got a boiled egg at Christmas'.)

The quality of food on offer in mother and baby homes was a recurring source of grievance even amongst the group of mothers who professed themselves grateful for 'sanctuary'. One member of this group, like the others cataloguing her appreciation of having 'a roof over my head, a place to sleep and food', (despite the latter being, in her estimation, 'Slop!') adding: 'You didn't have to worry about your weight!' 'Stew', offered a second witness, 'was soup and a few potatoes'. A third told the Committee that an 'ordinary' resident's breakfast consisted usually of 'lumpy porridge' taken, under fear of punishment, in strict silence, while the nuns enjoyed, she said, 'a fried breakfast and eggs'.

A man born in the mid-1940s into a mother and baby home, who could offer few memories of his time there, did remember that a nun 'had placed his hand into boiling water in the laundry for being bold'. He told the Committee that he spent nearly five years there before being sent to an industrial school.

This next witness came to the Confidential Committee to give evidence of his birthmother's story. She had told him she had been thrown out of the mother and baby home just weeks after she gave birth to him because she had attacked a nun on discovering a safety pin going through his penis...

A man born into a mother and baby home in 1947 reported that he had remained there until he was five years old, describing the home as 'a revolving door'. Characterising himself as a 'loner', he recalled there being a lot of children with him during his time there but that he never found out what became any of them, telling the Committee they would all 'disappear' after six months. He described where he lived during his time as physically 'very decrepit with an open toilet that wouldn't flush'. Prone to wetting himself, he spoke of being locked into a room for 'misbehaving' and told the Committee that he now continues to suffer from a lifelong fear of enclosed spaces.

During his time, he did make friendships with other children but could never hold them because 'they would suddenly disappear'. He recalls 'being put in a glass case while strangers would come and look at me'; this viewing was followed by being 'sent to the playground' where he would be 'observed'. He said he didn't understand this until much later. He was fostered out 'at the age of five or six years old', recalling that he was so upset he had refused to talk 'for days' in his new home. This man did meet his mother again when he was 13 years old, subsequently having sporadic but 'difficult' contact with her. She was by then 'with the Magdalens' in a laundry.

Another witness who had been born in a home in 1948 said to the Committee that his birthmother had told him that, as well as doing odd-jobs and looking after others in the home while she'd been resident there, one of her tasks had been to clean the toilets with a toothbrush.

A man, born in the same year, recalled having been quarantined with other children, all suffering from chicken pox. He needed a drink of water and asked for it; but because 'they' told him he would have to wait until dinnertime, he went to the toilet and drank

from that. Evidence from this man continued to be graphic. It included being 'let out into a field to play' and when out there with others, using (little balls of) 'pig shit' with which to play marbles; when they got back inside, 'the smell on your hands would be bad', he said, but 'they' wouldn't countenance cleaning them before dinner.

There was no sense in the home, he went on, of being 'wanted' because 'you were the product of an evil union and being made suffer for the sins of your parents.' He recounted the backs of his hands being hit with sticks and that the main sustenance for children was 'goody', a blend of hot milk, bread and sugar, which could cause severe diarrhoea. He said that he was 'always' hungry and that he suffered very badly on 'bath night' (held on one night a week) because 'they' would lace the bathwater with Jeyes Fluid, which caused him great pain: 'My scrotum would be burning'.

Some witnesses spoke of the threat of being sent to a Magdalen Laundry being hung over them. One mother who had taken one of the dirtier jobs, that of sluicing nappies, so she could be nearer to her daughter in the nursery, was thereby close to her for two years until her baby was transferred to a secondary nursery where she was no longer allowed to see her.

She told the Committee that she broke the rule by sneaking in to see her daughter only to be horrified at seeing her 'in a completely soiled condition' and took it upon herself to clean and change her. Her transgression was discovered and she was threatened with a transfer to a laundry. She, unlike many others who came to the Committee, had not been intimidated by this or any other threats, explaining that 'I was able to stand up for myself'. It was possibly because of this resilience that she and her daughter survived many ordeals, not least an outbreak of gastroenteritis amongst the babies, many of whom died.

During this outbreak, she was asked by a doctor to breastfeed babies other than her own to prevent infection spreading through bottles. She did so, while managing to prevail on the Reverend Mother to have her own child 'taken out and away from others' and to this day, believes that this saved her daughter's life.

While relating her experiences during the early 1940s in her mother and baby home, a woman told the Committee that she had been placed there at three months old having been born 'elsewhere' and had stayed for eight years.

Understandably, her early memories are not all that clear but she does remember 'rows and rows' of very high beds with children in them. She certainly remembers being charged, sometime later, with the 'minding' of two small toddlers - and on one occasion, lining them up along with 'rows of children, big and small' for a bath which was 'huge and sunken, with 'boiling' water. Of these eight years, one of the 'good' memories she retains is of when she was minding the two children and she was standing beside a stove and indulging in the 'rare treat' of eating bread and jam.

Other than these two toddlers, she told the Committee she had 'no pal, no recollection of attending school, no memory of having toys to play with or - sadly, of ever having experienced Christmas or birthdays.'

During this decade some of the witnesses said that they lived with the fear of punishment and they described the culture within which they lived as not just punitive but recriminatory.

Two witnesses came together as sisters to tell of their mother's experience, also in a home in the mid-1940s. Their mother had stayed with her baby boy until he died at two years of age and had blamed the nuns for his death because the place was wet and she believed that her son got TB from being on wet ground. She also told the witnesses that one of the nuns had 'knocked the baby out of my arms'.

The Committee heard from many women who were young (some not even in their teens) when they were placed in mother and baby homes because of a pregnancy following rape or incest. In general, these witnesses said to the Committee, that however young, however badly injured physically or psychologically by rape or incest a resident was, how she fell pregnant didn't matter. The nuns and nurses in the homes showed very little empathy and understanding and the women were there to atone for their sins.

A witness told the Committee that she'd had to knit garments for the babies, mentioning that one of the saddest tasks she

*was given was that of ironing the little dresses for the babies
'to get them ready for when people were coming in to see
them'.*

On top of the treatment they received at the hands of their carers, many mothers told the Committee that their most searing memory of their time in a mother and baby home was that of the screams of women looking through a window, through which she could see her child being driven away to a destination unknown; for many, there had not been a chance to say goodbye.

1950s

Three short stories from the 1950s:

- The first deals with being in a home during that decade and of being beaten by the 'priest chaplain' when this male witness was four or five years old. He came to the Committee to tell about his birth and remaining in the mother and baby home for some years.
- 'When I was having my baby', said one mother, 'the medical professionals knew that I had had a previous baby and one of the nurses gave me a clatter'.
- A 25-year old pregnant woman reported that she was 'forced to climb a ladder to clean windows', despite suffering from vertigo.

Then a witness, born in a home during the 1950s, recounted what his birthmother had told him about an episode during her residency in what she had described to him as 'an atmosphere of fear and terror the whole time, hardship and humiliation'. One of her companions, she said, had been punished for some transgression by being locked up in isolation. Feeling sorry for her, his mother had tried to take her a glass of water but was caught in the act by one of the nuns, who said: 'Who's in charge here?' slapping the glass out of her hand and, the witness said, then forced her to pick up the broken pieces and ordered her to clean and polish the corridor. This story had a good ending for both the witness and his mother when the witness's aunt came to visit the pair and, alarmed by what she saw and heard, arranged for both to be taken out of the home.

A witness told the Committee that when she was born, her birthmother was told by the nuns that her baby would be 'taken' and that she herself could 'work off her sin for the next three years'.

The witness learned that her mother's response to this information was that if that happened she would 'go to the top of the building with my child and commit suicide' the response to this being that she was 'badly' beaten by one of the nuns. On hearing of this, the witness's maternal grandmother took the two of them out of the home.

She told the Committee that she had worked out why the subsequent relationship between herself and her mother did not work out. 'She had walked into hell, had decided to blame me for her being there, and could not accept me'.

A witness now in his 70s, told of how he started life in a home in the 1950s, was subsequently in a county home, and thereafter in an industrial school. His life had been shaped, he said, in an 'extraordinary' way, by 'the isolation and abandonment' he felt he had suffered as a child.

A second man, born in the same year, told the Committee that his mother was 33 years old when she gave birth to him. This man had learned that when she was seven months pregnant with him, his mother's brother and sister had cycled 20 miles, with her on the handlebars, to deliver her to a county home from where she was transferred to a hospital, hence to the mother and baby home where she was to give birth to him. She subsequently spent a year there, unable to leave because, in his words, 'she didn't have the money to get out earlier'.

His first memory of meeting her was when he was an adult and she was in a Magdalen Laundry. The second was when she was in her 70s and still living there and it was during that meeting, she confessed to him that she had been unable to bond with him as a baby when they were both in the home, because her time had been taken up with

the requirement to mind other children. She died in that laundry. It was only after she was gone, when he himself was 70 years old, he discovered he'd had a sister born in the same home as himself, but who had died (he was told) at 10 months old. He said to the Committee, that he is 'not all that sure that she did' die and his search for further information continues.

One witness, born into a home back in 1942, told the Committee that even as an adult she 'feels fearful when seeing images of nuns'; another, pregnant at 19 years of age in the late 1950s, said: 'The very sight of nuns was to be forever frightening'.

1960s

Some witnesses described unkindness in mother and baby homes during all decades under review and not just in the early years. In 1967, for example, a woman who had been made pregnant during a rape went into a home at the age of 16. She recounted to the Committee how her father had taken her to court to force her into having her baby adopted but the judge ordered that she could keep the baby if she agreed for the child to remain in the home while she 'got back on her feet'. In the home, this girl visited her baby every day to tend to him and to do 'whatever else was asked of me to help with the baby's keep'. 'In that home' she said, she was 'physically and mentally abused by the nuns' and was told she 'was not fit to keep her baby'. When she married two years later, she took her son home.

Another witness from this decade recalled watching a child being beaten up: 'The child was kicked, and she fell, and the blood was pouring out of her head; the nun was hitting her, swiping her... she was unconscious and was carried off'. The witness does not remember ever seeing that child again.

'The deaths of babies were covered up', said some witnesses, with mothers being told, 'it's taken care of'. One witness who reported this to the Confidential Committee also said: 'Mothers were not told where the baby was, or given any records. One young girl whose baby died at two months old wanted to see where her child was buried and was told by the nuns that 'she shouldn't know'.

A son came to tell the Committee about what had happened to his mother when he was born (she too had complained about the food: 'Terrible! Cabbage, bacon and lumpy semolina' - and had described to him how she was made dig potatoes in the frost while wearing wellingtons without any socks). The son's own story included his attendance at school from his foster home (where he told the Committee he had been happy), but that it was a different matter at school, where he was taunted as 'the county home bastard' which he found very hurtful. Then he was moved to a different foster home, in which he was treated, he said, as a labourer.

The Committee heard a lot about the difficult practices in the homes - one of the most distasteful for one witness was working with what are now called feminine hygiene products. At the time in question, the early 1960s, residents in these homes customarily made their own sanitary towels ('from rags' one witness said) while the work of collecting them after use and laundering them, was assigned to a resident or sometimes more than one.

A witness to whom this task was given told the Committee that she also had to wash her hair with laundry soap in the home, and said she found the days 'long and boring' especially when the women 'would sit around the tables sewing and knitting while reciting the rosary'.

No matter what congregation or religious order was in charge, or where its institutions were located, a remarkable similarity of regimes in most homes was described by the stream of individual witnesses of all ages and from all parts of the country who came to the Confidential Committee.

At this point, while outlining conditions for - and treatment of - women and their children in mother and baby homes, it might be illuminating to gather together a short digest of quotes and information given to the Committee. The decades from which the quotes are taken are not in chronological date order.

- 'The nuns were tuned out of life'.
- 'They had no connection with people, nothing positive'.
- 'They would poke at you as you went along, they would push you along if you weren't walking fast enough'.

- 'There was Confession every week and we were reminded to confess what we had done but told we wouldn't receive absolution'.
- 'Any girls who tried to run away were brought back by the Gardaí'.
- (My mother) 'suffered terrible in there. She saw so many babies dying - no crying, no funeral, no parents arriving. She would breastfeed other babies and would steal milk from the kitchen for her own baby -'
- 'My mother was put back washing sheets two days after giving birth'.
- 'Local farmers would come to the home looking for a wife...'
- 'You were given less food after you gave birth, you were starving'.
- 'I remember seeing trollies with dead people (on them) being wheeled around'.
- 'As punishment for having a row over a toy on Christmas Day, I was put into a room with a corpse in the corner'. This witness was left in this room, he said, 'for six hours'.
- 'I had to care for a nun who had cancer'.
- 'I was pregnant from rape and I told the nuns I might have syphilis and that there was a danger my baby could be blind, deaf and dumb. I was sent for a test but not given any results'.
- 'It was clear that we were there to suffer'.
- 'My mother came in to see the baby and one of the nuns asked her: 'Why would you want to see something like that?'
- 'I was told by a nun: 'God doesn't want you... 'You're dirt'.

For some, the 'headgear' (the bonnets worn by members of some orders), was also a source of great fear. Some were huge, they said, their shape not unlike windmills, lending considerable height to their wearers.

For women and girls whose residency in mother and baby homes was paid for by themselves or their families (private patients), one 'ordinary' witness after another described how they knew that for this class of client, ('the posh girls', as they had been

dubbed by one witness) the diet was of a higher quality and the work less taxing. One witness from this group did concur with this view: 'There was a class system operating. I think I was treated slightly better than the others because I was from a good family'.

The Committee also heard from others in this category, whose tasks were:

'I churned the butter which was for the nuns...'

'We made apple tart for the nuns'.

'I had experience as a tailoress and I was given a bale of material to make skirts for jumble sales and clothes for the nuns' nephews and nieces'.

'My only complaint was that I was put to work for no money, making cards for Knock'.

'We were 'sewing lace onto the hems of nuns' slips'.

Then there was the witness who told the Committee that she had come to the mother and baby home from a very poor family that had included 12 children. She said that in the home, she found the food 'beautiful' and the place 'very warm', but a week after giving birth, despite coming from a city background and with no knowledge of farming, she was put to work on the farm, milking cows and feeding chickens and was 'hit' by the nuns for not doing this work correctly.

It was still in the 1960s when, like many others who came to the Committee, a pregnant 19-year old admitted to a home, 'was 'made to feel like a sinner and a fallen woman' adding, 'after enough exposure to such criticism, you began to believe it'. Set to work in the kitchen, she remembered 'making beautiful food for the nuns', while she and her fellow-residents ate 'like cattle'.

Not all witnesses were mothers or babies. Several individuals who had worked in the homes or who had had some interactions with them, applied to come before the Confidential Committee to tell of their experiences there and what they had observed.

For example, a psychiatric nurse came to the Committee to tell her story that while on night duty in her hospital 'in or around 1963-65' she was approached by a senior staff member who asked her to convey a young, pregnant girl, waiting in the hospital's

admissions unit, to a mother and baby home; her family had arranged for her reception there as she was close to giving birth.

The transfer was made in an ambulance. When she and her patient got there, she explained to the nun receiving them that for this mission, she had been assigned a 'red card'. This meant, she told them, that she was not permitted to leave the girl's side at any time even briefly. However, this nun called another and the nurse was told that from that time on, the home would now look after the patient. This nurse told the Committee that although she continued to protest and to explain her patient's 'red card' status, she was escorted to the canteen by four nuns for 'something to eat' before her return journey and having eaten, was directly led to the front door of the home where there was a taxi waiting for her, her final appeal to see her patient refused.

'The very next day', again at work in the hospital, this witness found it 'heart-breaking' to hear that her patient was already back in the hospital, without her baby. Yet she admitted to the Committee that she experienced a modicum of relief that she hadn't been fired for abandoning a 'red card patient'; she had explained what had happened with the nuns to her Matron and she, with one of the hospital doctors, telephoned the home. The nuns refused to talk to them, she said, characterising them as 'intimidating' and 'a law unto themselves'.

1970s

'You could almost feel the tears in the walls'.

A woman told the Committee that she was 17 years old when she entered the mother and baby home in the early 1970s, finding it to be a 'mix of hospital, school and jail, full of grief and despair and of disturbing things, including, she said, 'women screaming, a woman who had lost her mind, and a room with small white coffins'. She also recalled the presence of 'a nurse known to drink whiskey and a nun who would play with her false teeth'.

An 18 year old when she came to a home characterised the nuns there as 'verbally abusive'. After giving birth, 'it was drummed into my head that I couldn't be a good

mother, that I was not able to keep her' - one nun hammering at me that 'It wouldn't be good to keep her, that I had no experience, was never getting married, and would never get a house'.

'You were reminded every day that you were a sinner' - the words of a witness who in the mid-1970s, became pregnant when she was 17 years old. Her job was to clean the parquet floors in the home and: 'One nun would dirty the floor after I cleaned it. I would have to clean it again'.

On the day of arrival in the home, in the 1970s, at 24 years of age, this next witness had her hair cut off and was allocated the task of handwashing sheets, thick towels and other clothes, under the supervision of a nun who would 'shout at us to go faster'. She was not allowed to go outside the home or have any visitors or phone calls, telling the Committee that 'only the posh girls were allowed out'. Each week she received a package from a relative, 'but the nuns would take things from it before passing them on'.

'There was one nun who was terrible to the mothers', she continued: 'She would shout at them. One Christmas I was going to go home. I had packed my bags. My sister and partner had come to collect me. Five nuns stood in my way and wouldn't let me leave. They said they would get the Gardaí to come and arrest my sister and partner if they attempted to take me'.

Another mother, pregnant at just 15 years of age, entered the same home a few years later, one of the youngest there at the time. She was put to work in the convent where the nuns lived and told the Committee that sometimes she 'would feel weak from the work and pass out'. Although a teacher was brought in to help her with her studies, she had 'little or no contact with anyone else. I was being punished in there for what I had done'.

Some witnesses who came before the Committee did so specifically to relate positive experiences in homes, saying that they wished to add some balance to the stories, or simply to have it noted that while they had to work hard to atone for their sins, it wasn't all bad.

For instance, an 18-year old who had been resident in the same home as that 15-year old and at around the same time, said that she came to the Confidential Committee

because 'with all the negativity, I just wanted to try to balance it out. There were some things done right, there were some nice nuns. We got somewhere to go...'

Another felt somewhat the same. She had grown up in institutional care and described her institution as a 'home from home' and said that being there 'felt like being a child again, being minded'. She had 'meals and good company, it was sociable, communal and familiar'. This witness gave birth to four children in this home, coming in and out from 1970 until 1977; she gave her first three children up for adoption but told the Committee that on her fourth pregnancy, knew she couldn't let that happen again as 'I knew I would have to face my demons'.

In 1973, a woman, 23 years old at the time, returned to the mother and baby home having already been through two pregnancies (her parents had raised her first child as their own, her second was adopted.) On discovering she was pregnant for the third time, however, her father had wanted her to have an abortion and when she refused, she was thrown out of home, with a priest now involved in organising her re-entry into the mother and baby home. Her work there was 'washing floors' and in the laundry, 'stirring clothes'; but every Saturday morning, she could leave the home for work in her old job.

However, this witness refused to give birth in the home as the midwife there 'had a bad reputation for leaving girls in labour by themselves without pain relief'. After her third child, a daughter, was born, she was allowed to leave the home to visit the infant, who had been fostered - and then, eventually, adopted. This woman later married and had other children in her marriage.

Among the positive stories were:

- A witness, who was brought up in a number of industrial schools, was 17 years old when she arrived into the mother and baby home in the 1970s and when asked by the Committee to describe conditions there, had no complaints: 'Sure you were brought up with it', describing the home as 'lovely' her experience as 'comforting' and the nuns as 'nice', telling the Committee that they helped her to get a job: 'I needed someone and they were there for me'. She spent her time, she said, 'cleaning the home - but I

couldn't say we were slaves or anything'. Arrangements were made for her to have regular pre-natal check-ups at a maternity hospital and overall, she said, the experience was a good one'.

- A similarly positive experience was described by the second woman, 21 years old when she arrived into the same home. She said to the Committee that while other people's stories were 'harrowing', for her the home was a 'refuge' (a term commonly used by witnesses who had expressed their experiences as 'good', or 'positive'.)

This witness did explain that since she was older and more experienced than many of the women in the home; with most residents being between 16 to 18 years of age at the time, 'I would have been among the oldest there and the experience might have been easier for me'.

- The third story in this sequence involves a woman who had resided in the same home as the other two. She became pregnant at the age of 26 and entered it in the late 1970s, coming to the Confidential Committee to tell her story because she was eager to portray the 'good side' of the mother and baby home experience: 'It was not the horrors seen on TV', adding that: 'The nuns were not monsters'. She described the Reverend Mother, for example, as 'very kind' and - echoing home life difficulties referred to by the 21-year old above - added: 'my family were worse', and: 'Society had an obsession with hiding everything'.

As demonstrated by those three stories, many of the witnesses who testified that their experiences of homes had been comparatively positive, did so because, they told the Committee, on coming into them they had escaped from difficult or chaotic home lives, poverty, poor housing, beatings, alcoholism and incest.

Another witness, revealed she too had had a difficult home life where she had been exposed to conditions which she regarded as 'more severe' than at the mother and baby home. For her, the home was 'warm and comfortable' but while she found the nuns 'cold', this did not bother her. As a resident, this woman said, her tasks every day were 'cleaning and making religious objects such as scapulars'.

As for the food, she was pleased to be given 'hot food every day, and on Sundays we got roast chicken, potatoes and mushy peas, with jelly for dessert - and we were given Easter eggs on Easter Sunday'.

Even within the strictest of regimes in these homes acts of kindness were described. During her three and a half years of residence in one of the most regimented of these homes, one witness told the Committee about 'one kind nun' who gave her chocolate bars to give to her child; and it was the same nun who 'secretly' took a photograph of the woman's baby, which the witness still has.

'I had no other option', said a witness, 18 years old when entering one of these homes. 'But it was absolutely fine. Maybe I was one of the luckier ones', she went on, 'I think I was in the nicer side of the place'.

This woman told the Committee that she received ante-natal care, had a room to herself, and left the home every day to attend a typing course. 'The nuns', she added, knew in advance that she was putting her baby up for adoption (so there was no pressure on her as there was for many others.) 'I don't blame anyone for what happened', she said, 'I felt I had to provide some balance. No-one dragged you in there off the street. People mixed up their own shame with that of others'. Her view was that 'no one made you give up your baby'.

Even the entry mode into the more relaxed regime of one of these homes was spoken of as 'easier' than the norm pertaining elsewhere. It was relatively civilised when a 17-year old was brought to this place by her parents, all three were taken into the 'parlour' for the witness to be given the 'quota' of jobs she would be required to do. 'You had a few jobs to do', she said to the Committee, 'and then you were free to do what you wanted'.

This woman remembered 'no antagonism or judgment' saying: 'I would say I met some enlightenment in the home'.

On the other hand, a girl, only 14 years of age when she was raped and became pregnant, described the home to which she was sent as: 'Horrible'; she had to 'feed babies, morning and evening, clean and scrub floors, we were like slaves'. She told the Committee about 'a room at the top of the building, 'without staff present' but with

'approximately 50 babies in cots. They were not supposed to be known about', she said. 'They were all very quiet'.

1980s / 1990s

A witness, 17 years old when she entered a home during the 1980s, described the nuns there as 'kind' adding, however: 'the women were still made to feel that they had fallen from grace and had brought shame on their families'. One whom she described as 'a jolly character' would wake the woman and girls for breakfast and after their chores (cleaning still featured prominently) they had 'a few free hours during which they would knit baby clothes'.

There was a smoking room, and a non-smoking room with a TV, in which one of the nuns would watch TV with them. However, as so many other witnesses did, she too pointed out that the nuns 'ate differently' from the residents.

Another woman who entered the same institution in the 1980s, described it as 'welcoming and warm, a home away from home, of which she had 'fond memories'. She experienced a 'deep sense of peace' on arriving, especially 'being among other girls in the same situation' - and divulged that during the Cheltenham Racing Festival, the residents could go into the nearest town to place bets.

This witness had been a university student when she became pregnant and she told the Committee that the nuns bought all the books she needed to help her with exams: 'it was the making of me; afterwards I was determined to make something of my life.'

It was from this institution, the Committee heard from many witnesses, that a nun would drive their pregnant charges *en masse* to a hospital for ante-natal checks. 'We were called *the unnuptiates*' said one, 'and the nun would tell us when we were approaching (the hospital) and we would bend down and throw our coats over our heads'.

This witness came before the Committee to offer a personal perspective on her experience that was not all that much different to that of other witnesses, but wishing

nevertheless to offer context: 'I would like to think someone is speaking up for the nuns', she said, 'I want to be sure they're getting the kudos for getting it right'.

She told the Committee that she 'was glad to have found the mother and baby home, to escape the judgment of the public, the way they judged you. You were an absolute slut if it happened to you'.

During her time in a mother and baby home, this woman's companions included a girl of 14 years of age and the oldest resident, who, she said, 'suffered from mental difficulties and appeared not to be aware of her surroundings, or what was going on at all'. Within that same home, a separate witness described seeing a pregnant 13-year old 'clutching a teddy bear and sucking her thumb'.

An undercurrent of the accounts given by many witnesses indicated not just what they had personally suffered during their mother and baby home residencies but also confirmed the prevailing attitude towards 'fallen' women and their 'illegitimate' children within wider society in Ireland during these decades.

A woman, 17-years old, described living in the mother and baby home as 'a break' because she was 'getting away from a worse situation,' a sentiment reiterated by another who told the Committee: 'It was a bit of a relief to get out of the family home'.

Another witness who had been placed in a home following a rape, recalled a girl dying there during childbirth. This witness told the Committee that the girl's parents 'would not take her home, even in death...'

In the mind of this next witness, there is no doubt that the attitudes of these nuns mirrored those of the families who banished pregnant girls and women into these homes. She reported that within the home into which she went at 16 years of age: 'All who were there, were there to hide'. Some of the married women were there because of an extra-marital affair. Some of the girls had been beaten by their parents before being brought in, some had been raped by their fathers. One had been suffering

beatings by her mother - her father was raping and abusing her - and she came to the home with her hair chopped off and with chunks of flesh missing from her scalp.

Another man born in a home came to the Committee - again to bear witness on behalf of his birthmother who had been 17 years old when she became pregnant and went into a mother and baby home. She told him that she had been 'degraded' from the moment she went in, being called 'a dirty woman', 'a fallen woman' and 'a scarlet woman' - while having to bear 'constant verbal abuse about sin and shame'.

Another, born in a home, testified that when eventually she met her birthmother and asked her: 'was it awful?' the reply had been: 'No. It was my penance'. Another mother told the Committee she was so malnourished in the home that all her teeth fell out.

Many witnesses divulged that while resident in these homes, they had no contact with their families or, indeed, the outside world - although some did write letters, closely monitored and censored before being released for posting. Replies, should they come, were dealt with similarly.

15 years old when she became pregnant by her brother, a witness said to the Committee that when leaving home, she was told by her family she was being sent to boarding school, while other family members were informed she was going away as she had scarlet fever.

Her memories of the mother and baby home 'swing in and out;' she does not remember the birth of her baby, for instance, but 'thinks' she had a baby boy.

What she does remember is being sent to a psychiatric hospital to receive shock therapy - and, vividly, the sound of women in the home screaming during the night. 'They would be gone by the morning so I thought they were being killed. So I was waiting to be killed'.

This witness returned home after having her baby - and discovered that her brother was now in a seminary - and went back to school.

Another woman, 19-years old when she came to this home, told the Committee that as punishment for complaining about the food in the home in a letter she had written to her granny, she was forced to eat it in front of a nun, who pronounced: 'You can eat your words'.

The work assigned to a girl who was 17 years old when she fell pregnant in the latter years of the 1980s, included cleaning out the rooms of the girls whose parents were paying for them to be there. 'I had to dress and change their beds, make sure that their babies were looked after, buy sweets for them in the home's tuck shop and deliver their letters to the post office.' She also told the Committee that one woman working in the kitchen had been in the home for a long number of years because she had nowhere else to go - and had been frequently reminded of that; she said that an 11-year old was there for the same reason.

The changing times did mean that a witness who became pregnant at the age of 20 could describe the food routine in her institution, which was small, as positive. For example: 'After cleaning in the morning' you had breakfast - orange juice, toast and cereal. Lunch was a bowl of soup or a sandwich. Dinner was standard'.

Nevertheless, for this witness, the conditions were far from utopian. She described living in the home as (still) like being in a 'concentration camp'. Phone calls, for example, were monitored and every morning she felt 'like Cinderella; you had to clean your room and the stairs - and all the fires had to be cleaned before breakfast. You couldn't have any food until you cleaned'. If there was any practice demonstrating how greatly the regime in a home differed from those in the past it's this: when this witness missed dinner, she ordered takeaways.

A woman who was in one of the homes from where many residents' stories from earlier years were difficult to hear, was, nevertheless, eager to have her story heard as she felt it was important to say that this home was 'organised and well run, similar to that of a boarding school'. The women were provided with clean clothes and the home itself was 'very hygienic'. She did recall some babies dying during her time there.

She confirmed a detail, like that reported by another witness, that for those women who didn't want their families to know they were pregnant and living in a home, this one, as with others, facilitated letters to be mailed from the UK. Then adding her own positive view of her experience, she added that she had left the home 'with skills, knowing how to look after babies, knowing how to feed and handle them, knowing about hygiene'. She also told the Committee that the nuns in the home helped mothers get jobs and that they gave references. Speaking of the prevailing societal view at the time, she also told the Committee that while residents could leave the home and 'head down the town', no-one wanted to. They were there to conceal their pregnancy.

The downside for her, was that there was no preparation given 'for the impact of giving up your baby' but she firmly believed that apart from that detail, 'without the nuns, many mothers would have been out on the streets' and in her opinion, 'it was the *families* that were hard on the mothers... and men. Men got away with it. Society doesn't think about all the men that got those girls pregnant'.

This witness's indignation was palpable. However, she was one of the few witnesses to bring up the subject of birthfathers' behaviour, attitudes and seeming lack of personal responsibility in this manner, 'there was always a slur on you. The men just walked away and got on with their lives while you're left haunted.'

In 1983, a witness of mixed race, pregnant as a result of an assault at the age of 20 (having already given birth to a son following a rape when she was 16 years old) sought refuge, with her first son, in a mother and baby home. When she arrived, she said, the nuns did not ask why she needed help or anything about her history; they simply took her son from her and put him,' she said, 'in an annexe of the home' away from her. This was an area specifically set aside for children who were unlikely to be adopted because of abnormalities or deformities. In her son's case, she believed that he was placed there because he was of mixed race. She recalled that a nun would call him 'filthy' and 'Little Black Man'.

While giving her evidence, she said the nuns suggested to her that she had prostituted herself, and went on to advise her: 'to refrain from exchanging sexual favours for money'. The witness said that her son who had been placed in the annexe was badly affected by his stay there. Her second son was placed in the nursery immediately after he was born and she was permitted to see him only for feeding at set times, thus, she believes, severing a bond between mother and son and when making plans to leave,

she was advised that since she had not done such a good job with her first child, she shouldn't keep this new one. This witness's difficulties continued in the wider community after leaving the home with both sons, but, following some time in foster care for them, she eventually took them away from Ireland to live in the UK.

One woman, who had had a good experience in a mother and baby home, refused to allow her father to take her home, choosing to remain there with her second child as she needed the help of the nuns and 'could not cope with the shame on the outside'.

In the mid-1980s the changes and improvements that had been happening little by little in mother and baby homes became more apparent and by the 1990s, in one home, previously a source of a stream of complaints from some witnesses, women were being allowed to keep their own names and were offered weekly training courses. One witness took a course in the art of stained glass. A witness, who went in to a home at 21 years of age, was anxious to highlight its 'good side', reporting that all the conditions were 'good'. She had her own bedroom and freedom to go out when she wanted. She too took one of the FAS courses, this one in art and pottery and was paid £50 per week while she learned. She told the Committee, that while adoption of her child was discussed, there was no pressure, and there were no repercussions when she decided to keep her baby.

Another witness said that it was pretty obvious that it was a 'factory for girls up from another part of the country, having kids and going home as though nothing had happened;' while a highly positive perspective of her experience in a home was given by a woman who entered it in the 1990s at the age of 26. She described it as 'a sanctuary, a safe haven, a saving grace - I could be relaxed and carefree; and as a very distressed pregnant person, I never felt I was being judged. I felt I was being cared for as a pregnant woman in crisis'. The home was probably not perfect but was the next best option and was run in the way that mother and baby homes should have been run all along.

The Birth experience

The accounts offered by many witnesses to the Confidential Committee spoke of common experiences during stays in mother and baby homes. Many also said they faced into labour and giving birth without having any information at all about what faced them. Some, not expecting it, were shocked to discover what labour entailed when it arose; these girls and women, some up to late teens and even beyond into their 20s, came to a home in complete ignorance of the facts of life, even of 'where and how the baby gets out'.

These facts had never been discussed with them by anyone in their own homes, schools or in the institutions. Some of them had only 'behind the bike shed' speculation with friends who were equally uninformed so labour and what followed came as a shock. Some of these women told the Committee, it was not just the acute pain, but what was being done to them by their 'carers' (sometimes medical professionals), outlining for the Confidential Committee how grossly they had been verbally insulted, degraded and even slapped during the process of giving birth.

Even of those who had known what to expect in terms of the natural process of birth, what was additionally dreadful for them, they said, was the complete absence of pain medication. This, some alleged, had been deliberate since their birth pains were represented by some nuns (and nurses) as 'punishment' - retribution by God for becoming pregnant out of wedlock. One interviewee, screaming for relief, said she was told to look at the crucifix on the wall. Pain relief was given in some hospitals and in a few homes.

The overall experience of birth, was described by some as so traumatic that there were lifelong physical repercussions, while others were traumatised psychologically. For instance one witness vividly described how 'her insides were nearly dragged out of her' during delivery - with no pain relief - and how nurses, as well as nuns were 'rough' - and liberal with the insults they cast on her and the names they called her. Another said that after her birth experience she was left 'dizzy, anaemic, with post-natal bleeding and a mental state of high anxiety, ending up with a post-traumatic stress disorder,' adding that 'you never get off the floor' after such an experience.

'I never saw a doctor' was a constant refrain, as was another about not being given time properly to recover from the physical and emotional stress of birth, let alone a very difficult one - or the experience of having your baby 'whipped away' without giving you, as a new mother, a chance even to see, touch or hold him or her. Instead, very many said, they were quickly put back to work, some of it exceptionally heavy, as in scrubbing stone floors on hands and knees, or working on the land, and being verbally abused while at it.

Those whose babies had been bound for adoption right from the start told the Committee how frustrating it was to be forbidden to cuddle or even hold their new babies, even when feeding them in a nursery specifically designated for babies going to new mothers and fathers. Others told of nurseries in some mother and baby homes, where damaged, feeble, ill, sometimes those of mixed race - and 'the handicapped' babies (as the terminology of the time had it) were all housed together since the nuns believed they had little prospect of being chosen as adoptees.

Immediately after birth in some homes, 'wet nurse' breastfeeding of other women's babies was in some cases encouraged, while in other homes, the birthmother could bottle feed her own child (along with many others) provided she abided by the rule sequence - *feed, change, put down*. Many told the Committee that bonding was not encouraged.

Some witnesses reported to the Committee that this approach in the homes meant lifelong difficulties in bonding with subsequent children; a few said that their maternal instincts had been destroyed.

1940s

A witness told the Confidential Committee that 'One night in 1942', she was feeling very sick in the home and feared she might have wet the bed. She was 21 years old at the time and was afraid that the nuns 'would kill her'. Eventually a nurse came and told her she was in labour. Her stay in the labour ward was for three days and nights, with no pain relief and no-one with her. Then a doctor arrived and ordered the nurses to

'strap her' as it was to be a breech birth; she said she was in agony, as they 'turned' the baby.

Later in the 1940s, a witness who had become pregnant at the age of 18 and, like many, had received no pre-natal care, was transferred to a hospital for the birth but unfortunately, her baby was stillborn. She told the Committee that the doctor was 'cold' and simply said to her: 'Your baby is dead'.

1950s

In this decade, the situation around pain relief or doctors' presence did not change very much. A witness came to the Committee on behalf of her mother who had not told her parents she was pregnant until she was eight months 'gone'. Her mother had told her there was neither doctor nor pain relief available to her during labour and when she was giving birth, her legs were tied to the bed and one of the nuns sat on her chest to get her to push.

The first time another witness ever saw nuns, she said to the Committee, was in the mid-1950s. She was in labour when she was brought to the mother and baby home. The witness was 14 years old when she became pregnant, knew nothing of what was happening to her body or about childbirth and although in serious pain from the onset of labour, was given no pain relief. The nun with her during the process told her: 'You've had your fun, this is payment'. The baby weighed nearly 10 pounds.

It was also during that decade that a 12-year old girl was raped by a family member and when her pregnancy was discovered, sent to a mother and baby home. 'I was washing the floor. I had pains. I was told I was having a baby. My waters broke. I thought I had spilled something or I had wet myself. I was brought to a room and I was put in a bed. There was clear glass in the door, I was screaming in pain. I got out of the bed because I was in so much pain but I was told to get back into the bed. The baby was born. The nun told me to give the baby a name and I did. My baby died. I was never told what happened. I was told I was going home and that I wasn't to talk about it anymore. My mother told me my baby was dead. I don't know anything after that'.

This next witness, 18 years old at the time she gave birth told the Confidential Committee that she had 'no ante-natal care, no doctor, no pain relief'. It was a breech birth and the nun looking after her had had no experience of dealing with this situation and within the hearing of the witness, went into an adjoining room to ask the mothers there 'to get down on your knees to pray for her because she's going to die'. She did not die, but, the Committee heard, she still feels upset about how 'cruelly and inhumanely' she was treated.

Also 14 years of age, when the waters of this next witness broke in another mother and baby home, she said she 'got an awful fright and didn't know what was happening'. She had a 'terrible labour experience', and was not prepared at all, thinking that her baby would come out of her navel. Her 'delivery room' was, she said, 'a mattress on the floor'. She received no pain relief and every time she tried to get up, was pinned back down by the ankles and told to pray. There was another girl going through the same experience beside her, she said; this girl 'had an epileptic fit' and on seeing this, the witness thought the same was going to happen to her.

Another witness was equally terrified when her waters broke in the home; the nurse administered an enema - and 'made her' sit on a commode. In the interim, she was spoken to 'derogatorily', with the nurse telling her... 'It's good enough for you; you tasted the sweet, now taste the sour! Christ suffered on the cross for you'. She eventually gave birth to a baby girl and was told how lucky she was. 'Nobody wants to adopt boys'.

As reported by a witness who also gave birth in the 1950s, 'there was a building down from the main home known as 'the mattress room' where women were sent if they were screaming during labour.

Witnesses said that 'derogatory' talk was common in homes during the process of childbirth during these decades. One nun's comment made to a 16-year old going through the throes of labour and birth was: 'You didn't feel it going in, but you'll feel it coming out!'

This to a woman who was experiencing a prolonged labour, much of it alone in a 'dark room with bats flying around outside in the courtyard' without pain relief, without a doctor at any stage and with those who did come to tend to her:

'completely unsympathetic'. For instance she was told she was now 'paying' for her 'five minutes of pleasure'. In the same harsh spirit, 'You're paying for your fun' was what was thrown at a 16-year old going through a difficult labour.

1960s

A doctor was called to attend the delivery of a baby of a 20-year old in a mother and baby home during the 1960s. The witness said that he had 'a face like thunder because he was so annoyed he had to come'. She had been going through labour, alone, for two days in a 'waiting ward' where she was given nothing to eat. This doctor put her to sleep for a forceps delivery and when she awoke, she told the Committee that he 'stitched her without giving her any pain relief,' and that she 'would never forget the pain'.

Still having been given nothing to eat for a further three days, she was forced to walk, but had suffered nerve damage to one of her legs and could not do so - and was placed 'on bed rest' for three weeks, adding that having 'spent so much time in bed, my legs were like knitting needles'. (This witness later discovered that this doctor had cut 'right through her rectum' and that for years afterwards, she was unable properly to defecate.)

Another witness, a woman who had been in a home in 1965 when she was 16 years old and having had no medical care prior to her labour, 'passed out from the pain' and told the Committee that 'a bowl was placed on the floor so that the blood would not splatter'; she described the birth scene as 'being like the calving of a cow'.

It was also in the early 1960s that the waters of a 16-year old girl broke when she was using the toilet in the home to which she had been admitted. She did not know what was happening, and was 'made' get a bucket of water to 'clean it up'. If she made any noise she was 'hit with a belt' she said and she, like many others, was told she was 'paying for her sins...'

A rape victim, 18 years old when she was admitted to the 'hospital part' of a mother and baby home to give birth, describing it as a place where 'a light shone from the ceiling'. When she went into labour she had been 'placed on 'a table', was given 'no painkillers or injections' and, she said, because she had a small frame, 'they cut her with an ordinary knife'. This woman, referring to the pain and treatment she went through as 'torture', said, like many others, that she had had 'no idea what to expect' from the time she went into labour.

Another 18-year old gave birth in a mother and baby home and after it, one of the nuns brought in the 'bloodied sheets' and told her to clean them. She told the Committee that the nuns in this home referred to the women in their care as 'unclean'. (During childbirth, this witness was attended by a midwife who 'slapped her across the face' when she screamed, said she was an 'an unclean bitch' and told her to: 'Get on with it'.)

In 1967, a witness who was 19 years old went into labour while polishing floors in a home, but was 'instructed' by the nun to continue. When the pain got worse she was moved to a small room and, still in labour, was 'locked in, alone, for the night'. By the time someone came to check on her, she told the Committee, her baby was crowning and she was 'barely able to walk'. There had been no doctor present for the birth and she was ordered to breastfeed her baby as 'they couldn't afford to buy milk'.

The baby of another witness, 20 years old when she entered a 'prolonged' labour, was eventually delivered by forceps in the hospital annexe of the home and both remained there for 10 days following the birth. She said she was 'looked after well, given salt baths and when better, was returned to the main house, while her daughter was sent to the home's nursery. This meant, however, that she was allowed to visit the child only to bottle-feed her.

Her baby unfortunately succumbed to gastroenteritis and was removed to a hospital. She was then, quickly, transferred to a second one, where she died at two months old. The witness, who had been allowed to visit only twice, was told only that her daughter had had 'an infection'. One of those visits had been at a time just before her baby died and, she reported to

the Committee, she was 'grey, just waiting to die. I never got the chance to know her'. Her daughter was buried in an Angels' Plot in a cemetery.

A baby son was born to the next witness. 'He was 'born blue' and didn't cry 'but they didn't seem bothered about that, put me in a bed and gave me something to eat'. This baby died in a hospital at eight weeks old and the witness later found out that he had been there for the three weeks prior to his death. When she tackled a nun about this, she was dismissed with a curt: 'Your baby is in heaven'.

The Committee heard many stories about the onset of labour - the breaking of waters - an 'unknown terror' for many. At 19 years of age, this witness described waking up during the night in 1965 to find her waters breaking and 'having drowned the place', not having any idea what was happening to her. All she knew was that she was 'in awful pain'. She had been told to 'call [X]' that night should 'something happen' but had no idea what that meant. When she still hadn't seen anyone by 1.30 on the afternoon of the next day, she crawled down the stairs to get help, but when, on seeing her, a nun was 'unpleasant and dismissive' the witness started to shake uncontrollably. It was recognised she was now in shock, heaters were brought into a room and she eventually gave birth and breastfed her daughter for three weeks, between periods of work in the fields, picking potatoes.

A year before that, 1964, a 16-year old got the 'fright of her life' when the same thing happened to her and her waters broke. She was standing beside her bed in the mother and baby home and was so scared of reprisals for wetting the floor, she tried to mop it.

But there were some positive witness accounts of the birth experience interspersed with these stories. A 24-year old in a home in 1962 told the Committee that her experience was 'good', that the nuns treated her well, and that they liked her. The consequences, however, had not been so positive because she was another who had, following orders, acted as a wet nurse to many babies and as a result, unfortunately, was unable to breastfeed the children she had had later, as her breasts 'were destroyed', so much so that a Master of a maternity hospital she attended warned her 'never to breastfeed again'.

Given her circumstances, another witness managed to find something positive in her experience. She had spent her childhood in an orphanage and had later worked in a Magdalen laundry, where the nuns discovered she was pregnant and sent her to a home. She was 21 years old. By the time she entered a hospital for the birth, she was suffering from toxæmia and high blood pressure and - contrary to the experiences of others who came to the Committee telling of being admitted to hospitals where staff 'looked down' on 'the unmarried' - this woman said the staff she encountered in her hospital were 'nice' to her 'and didn't treat me any differently to other women'.

A witness who gave birth in the late 1960s in a home had little memory of it but what she did recall, she reported, was that she'd been 'badly torn, stitched from hole to hole, like they were trying to stitch back your virginity'. She was 16 years old.

Another 16-year old, pregnant from rape, who came in to a home, was in labour for 24 hours, was not allowed out of bed during this time and was told to 'stop screaming' as she was 'frightening the other girls'.

A witness was born in a mother and baby home in the late 1960s and was adopted from there. She came to the Committee on behalf of her birthmother to relate what had happened to her while giving birth to the witness. She told her daughter that her hands and (open) legs had been tied to the bed and she screamed for pain relief while a nun, sitting, knitting, at the end of her bed told her: 'you have to go through this pain for your sins'.

A very different experience was reported to the Confidential Committee by a witness who, pregnant with twins, was in a home in 1968 and recalled being 'well treated'. When seen by a doctor there, she was transferred to a hospital where within a couple of days, her waters broke. Both babies, however, were breech and quite large for twins, each weighing more than five pounds. Sadly, her first daughter died during delivery and she was anaesthetised for the delivery of the second. She recalled a nun telling her she was so sorry one of the babies had died as they had 'taken such good care' of her, and this witness said she had 'felt protected by the home' as she was 'one of the people who had no one to stand up for them'.

In 1968, a pregnant 18-year old went into labour while working in the mother and baby home, had no idea what was happening and was put into the home's labour ward while believing that her baby was going to come out of her belly button. She spent 'hours' there sitting on the bed 'with a pan under her' and with no-one coming when she called. She was getting off the bed when a nurse came in, 'was very coarse' with her and 'slapped her on the cheek for getting up'. The midwife (a named nun) came in and questioned this nurse as to why she had not been called earlier as the witness was 'so far along' and, she said, 'the nurse lied'. (This witness is angry that her son was diagnosed with a serious birth defect only when he was 40 years old.)

This next witness, self-described as 'clueless about labour' (she was 21 years old but believed at the time that 'the baby would come out of her backside') was cleaning in the mother and baby home when she went into labour and was brought to the labour ward, where the presiding midwife had a reputation for being 'very stern'. The witness told the Committee that this midwife kept telling her to 'hurry up' while continuing to 'push her onto her side' - and when she screamed in pain, admonished her to 'be quiet!' She was placed in stirrups, her legs were 'pulled' and she was being 'bashed on the bum'. When born, her baby was taken away immediately. However, a doctor came in, and the witness recalls 'them pushing on her stomach for the afterbirth'.

Apart from being brought her dinner, the witness told the Committee, she was 'left alone'. She said she was moved to a new section after New Year's Day and received 'better treatment' there. She also told the Committee that throughout the birth process, she felt that the midwife was 'in a hurry to get away as it was Christmas time' - and that after dealing with this birth, would be on holiday.

'Now another little piglet born into the world!' was the comment of a nun, one of three officiating at the birth of the baby of a witness, when her baby emerged.

It was in this decade of the 1960s that the mother of a pregnant 15-year old colluded with a nun in the mother and baby home that her daughter would be induced early (she was to give birth in a nearby hospital) so she could be home for Christmas and keep up the pretence that she was away in a boarding school.

The witness had not been told what was to happen during labour and was very frightened. Her waters were broken in the hospital two days before labour began but she has no memory of that, of getting any pain relief or of the labour. She told the Committee that hospital staff were very judgmental of her and that having delivered, she had to walk from the delivery suite back to her room and kept passing out - only to be told: 'Cop yourself on!' Having given birth, she was finally brought home (where the 'episode' was never to be mentioned again) then sent back to school.

Similarly, the family of another witness persuaded the authorities in both a mother and baby home and a hospital to induce their 17-year old daughter a month early; 'I had an aunt coming home and it had to be done before she came'. The request was facilitated.

Like others, this next witness had been confined to her bedroom at home as soon as her pregnancy became known. In her words, when induced in hospital, her labour and the birth were 'horrific: I was hooked up to drips, there was blood everywhere, I was screaming and roaring, I think I passed out'. The next morning, an ambulance arrived and I got in with my baby and another girl and her baby, and we went to the mother and baby home. When we arrived, 'a nun was at the back of the ambulance and she put her hands out for the babies. I thought she was going to help me out of the ambulance but she took my baby and that was the last I saw of him. I was only a few days in the home, the baby was left in the nursery and I was brought home. I had been off the scene for months. People were told I had had a tumour'.

The relative who collected a witness (28 years old when she gave birth) did not recognise her when collecting her from the mother and baby home. After the birth, she had developed a severe toothache with huge swelling on her face; the nuns had placed her in a room in the convent part of the home. The swelling on her face continued to balloon to the extent that she was unable to speak or swallow, while her chin extended into her neck and continuously-running saliva drenched her, 'so I was wet all the time'. She asked for a doctor but this was refused and when she cried out for help to the nuns, 'they would either ignore me, tell me to say a prayer or to 'look at the cross above you'. 'I was dying and no one was taking a tack of notice of me'. A friend in the home brought her baby up from the nursery so she could say goodbye to him, 'so I put a medal on him', she told the Committee, 'and wrapped a blanket I had bought for him around him'.

Like the relative who had collected this witness, when she was brought home, her family didn't recognise her and although they didn't think she would survive overnight, were ashamed to call an ambulance in case it became known that she had been in a mother and baby home. Instead, they called a locum doctor, who on seeing her, assumed she was deformed - and when the family eventually revealed where she'd been, 'he began to swear and said he was going to report [on this] but the witness's mother begged him not to; he gave the witness 'an enormous injection and informed her she had 'a massive abscess and a massive infection' and that if he had not been called, 'you would have died. You would not have lasted the night'.

Again and again, the Confidential Committee was given examples of how, during these decades in Ireland, single mothers were denigrated not just by their families, schools, churches, places of work and fellow citizens in general, but by those given care of them in mother and baby homes and even in maternity hospitals.

One witness, raped when she was 19 years old, was in a mother and baby home from which residents were regularly brought in groups for ante-natal check-ups to a hospital. She reported that when on arrival the group would alight from their vehicle, the married women would laugh and in their hearing, make comments such as 'Look at the whores!' The witness told the Committee, that on one occasion, the matron of this hospital said to her: 'I've six married women here giving birth; I'm not wasting my time on you'.

An 18 year old was with her sister in the visitors' lounge in a home when her waters broke. The witness begged her sister to take her home but the nun told this sister to leave. At 10pm that night a nurse told her to get up on the table, the witness told the Committee that she asked: 'Where's the baby coming from?' and she thought she was going to die that night. The nurses, this witness said, 'were far worse in their treatment than the nuns, speaking derogatorily to the girls and saying: 'You're all the same'.

Another witness was 25 years old when she gave birth in a hospital having gone there from a mother and baby home - and was told her baby was 'spastic'; when she saw him, he was in an incubator and, she was told, he couldn't now be adopted.

The witness then had to bring him to a clinic for treatment and exercises and was later told that he had progressed so well, 'it was a miracle' - and that he could now 'get the go ahead for adoption'.

1970s

In 1976 at 14 years of age this next witness arrived in a mother and baby home. A nun explained to her what was involved in giving birth, and, she recalled, 'it was like being called into the headmistress's office'. In later years, she became very upset to read on her file that one of the nuns had written that she had been 'sleeping around since the age of 12' and had 'planned her pregnancy'. The witness insisted that both allegations were 'absolutely untrue'.

It was in the 1970s that a witness, in the course of giving her evidence about her own experience, told the Committee that she felt she should report something she saw happening to another woman in her mother and baby ward. She said that she saw this other woman being told that her baby had been stillborn - but then 'saw a nun take this baby from the ward with a towel over the baby's face. But, at the end of a corridor', she said, 'the nun took the towel from the baby's face' and the witness could see that 'the baby was alive and crying'.

That mother, she said, left the mother and baby home believing that her baby had died. She also described to the Committee how people visiting the home to look at the children designated for adoption, 'picked babies like you would choose sweets in a candy shop'. As a consequence, the witness told the Committee that she used to hide her own baby in 'the room for disabled babies' so that no-one would pick him.

Another 20-year old who was pregnant in this era remembers an old gynaecologist who had arthritis. When the gynaecologist went to examine you, 'the fingers would stick into you'. This witness was given no pain relief when giving birth, because this gynaecologist said to her that they 'wanted me to feel every pain'. While a younger colleague of this gynaecologist observed that the witness needed a C-section ('I was only tiny. I'm skinny now but I was tiny'), the response of the older one was: 'she's

from (the named) home, she's an unmarried mother. She can have it this way, she'll remember it and she won't ever do it again'.

'It was the most horrendous experience', the witness went on, recalling women in labour, 'screaming for hours and they (the nuns) wouldn't come and we'd all be petrified that something was going to happen... We'd all be banging on the doors - and they might come when they decided'.

This next witness was 16 years of age when she was admitted to a home in 1975. She told the Committee that she fell down the stairs in the home, went into labour early as a result, and was sent, alone, on a bus to a hospital to give birth. The witness said that she is very angry about this and recalled an image of herself sitting on the street alone, in labour, weeping, not knowing where to go to get to the hospital. Her baby, she said, was very underweight when born and remained in hospital for nearly a year.

There were a few witnesses who gave 'happy' accounts of their birth experiences in mother and baby homes during these decades and this one goes part of the way.

In 1978, a woman who gave birth in a home, told the Committee that she believes now that 'times had changed' and that there was 'evidence of a bit more humanity'. Her labour was 'difficult and prolonged', she said, leading to her being brought to hospital by ambulance (with, incidentally, the nuns around her 'panicking when the paramedics called her by her real name) and when she arrived, 'the staff were very nice to me'. She did receive pain relief and once her daughter was born, was given a chance to see her.

But the story is not all good. The nuns had warned her not to bond with her baby and the witness had to undergo years of counselling to cope with the effects of that. Her experience in the home 'defined the person I became and my entire life'. She was in her 60s when interviewed.

Another witness later in this decade again testified, as so many had, that neither she nor the other women in the homes were given pre-natal information about labour, contractions or childbirth. Once a month, a doctor came in, an 'awful', ignorant man. 'He never spoke to you, you just lifted your clothes and he examined you. He made you feel you were

picked off his boots. So the only information you had was Chinese whispers from other girls, which was very frightening: How can a baby come out of there?'

A 19-year old entered a mother and baby home in 1970. She told the Committee that despite having had some 'classes', she went into labour not recognising it; 'I didn't take on board that I was having a baby'. When she did give birth: 'I was so happy I could have gone through the roof; I hadn't realised how maternal I was'. But soon afterwards, she said, her son was 'whipped away - before he caught my sin'.

Another witness said that in a home during this decade, the residents had not been given any information or ante-natal care other than being 'lined up every week and weighed like cattle'.

Another witness reported that her labour began at 1.00 am but she was afraid to wake the midwife because 'she was cantankerous'. In the meantime, however, she began to haemorrhage badly: 'Pieces of my placenta were falling out of me'. The midwife came at 8.00 am to deliver the baby, in the process hurting the witness, who reacted by screaming - but like the report of the woman earlier, was also told: 'Be quiet!' This time, the nurse-midwife added: 'You've had more than that up there!' When the baby was born, he weighed 4 pounds 15 ounces, he was not breathing and he was immediately transferred to a hospital where he remained for two months.

Still in the 1970s, a 17-year old 'didn't know what to do' when her waters broke. When she started labour, she was told by a nun: 'This is your punishment. Remember what will happen tonight, never have another baby before marriage'. She was not given any pain relief and was told by the nurse who delivered the baby: 'That's the last time you're going to see him, he's gone now'.

Another girl who fell pregnant at the age of 15 (and like so many, 'knew nothing about sex') was admitted to a mother and baby home during that decade. She told the Committee that when she went into labour, the Reverend Mother said to her: 'Get up on that bed! You've never had a problem getting up on something before'; another nun, she said, then 'came at me with a fistful of lube and told me to 'open my legs, that I had had no problem opening them before!'

Like others, this witness said she never saw her baby and no-one told her whether it was a boy or a girl. She was collected by an aunt on the day she had given birth,

which was one day after her 16th birthday, via a side door of the mother and baby home, and was sent back to school the following week.

Then came the witness who'd been pregnant with twins when she had been admitted to a hospital to give birth. She made the familiar remark about staff there 'judging' her because 'I was an unmarried mother'. Both of this woman's twins were breech, the second died 12 hours after birth. However, she said to the Committee, she still wished to 'balance out' the negativity about mother and baby homes, saying that 'some of the nuns in this home were nice'.

When moved from her first mother and baby home to another, a 17-year old victim of rape told the Committee that she found the conditions in the second one 'extremely' harsh - and that she had been verbally abused by nuns. She found childbirth 'very painful' but was given no pain relief while going through it - and overheard this question and answer during a conversation between a nun and the doctor present:

'What will we do with her, Doctor?'

'Make sure she doesn't have any more!'

This young 1970s rape victim had no pain relief while being stitched - 16 internal, 16 external - didn't see her baby after the birth, didn't know whether it was a boy or a girl. Three days later, she was put back to work in the home. Her mother had arranged work for her in a convent but she was crying all the time and her 'head was gone'. The mother then signed her into a psychiatric hospital where she remained for 15 months. But: 'I've never been right,' she said to the Committee, 'I'm haunted by these memories. I can't forget it. It destroyed me'.

Like her, this next witness has never forgotten what a nun said to her when she was going through labour in 'extreme pain' (again no doctor, no pain relief, very little checking-up on her progress). Engraved on her memory, she told the Committee, is a comment made by a (named) nun while she was going through the birth process: 'If you felt it going in, you'd feel it coming out'.

When this next witness screamed in pain while in the last stages of a 16-hour labour in the home, she was forbidden to do so again - and the nurse 'produced a crucifix'. Still

with no pain relief, she told the Committee, she was 'cut with a scissors' to facilitate the birth and was then stitched. She bled heavily after the birth and allied procedures however, she said, the nurse 'pulled her out of the bed'. She had no aftercare, was simply told to take 'salty baths' but,' she said, she was 'given tea and toast'.

A woman who had been in a home in 1972 at the age of 20 recounted seeing a girl in labour there being told to 'open your legs like you did nine months ago'. She herself said she had received no medical examinations until the birth process was well underway and there was never any discussion about what to expect. She was scrubbing floors when she realised labour had started, but was told by the nun that until she had completed the job, she could not leave'. This labour lasted, she said, for two days while she was alone for most of the time, clinging to a statue of Our Lady, and with no pain relief. Another woman, 30 years old, told the Committee that she had to attend Mass while in labour.

On first seeing the baby son of a witness who was 19 years old when she gave birth to him in the home, the comment of her mother, the baby's grandmother was: 'Saint Damien the Leper!'

In the mid-1970s, another witness (who was three days in labour when giving birth in a home at 14 years of age) was another, she told the Committee, who was ignorant of what was coming: 'I didn't know if it was going to come out my ear. The only solace was, if the handicapped girls could do it, I could too'. Still in labour, she was transferred to a hospital where 'they tried everything to pull it out of me', describing the use of forceps and suction - 'and a scissors to cut me. I could feel it opening'. She added that staff in the hospital 'were not kind' to her and that after the birth, she was 'dumped' on an examination table in the corridor and left alone for 24 hours before the nuns came to collect her. This witness subsequently suffered gynaecological problems and had a hysterectomy when she was 29 years old.

That witness was one of many who reported gynaecological and other medical complications in later life arising from difficult childbirths during their stays in mother and baby homes. One woman, who was 19 years old when admitted to a home, told the Committee that she is 'having flashbacks to this day'. During her time in there, she said 'she knew nothing and nothing was explained, she was left alone during almost her entire labour and was examined only on arrival in the labour ward and then once more. She said she was 'eating the blankets with the pain'.

To this day, she said to the Committee, she still 'suffers from nightmares, wakes up eating her blankets', and has been left with gynaecological problems and the mental effects of the traumatic experience.

A witness, pregnant from rape at the age of 19 in the mid-1970s, described her memories of the mother and baby home as 'horrific', including having to deal with the conviction of one nun that this was not her first pregnancy. She thought I was a 'repeat offender'. This was because of a scar the witness had from having her appendix out; this nun, however, 'believed it was there from having had a C-section'.

The witness told the Committee that she 'felt like a piece of meat. I was bleeding and I think I would have been left to die had I not been from a well-off background. They made that quite clear'.

Eventually she was rushed to hospital and having been given '40 stitches', was given a blood transfusion (and developed hepatitis) and when she was returned to the home, the nuns made her bathe in Dettol. But she bled for two months - was still bleeding when she left the home, and eventually attended a maternity hospital in Dublin where the doctor, on examining her, found that half of the after-birth had been left inside and asked her: 'what butcher did this to you?'

Amongst the numerous reports and comments to the Confidential Committee about post-birth stitching and the way some of it was executed, one woman, in a home in 1978 at the age of 19 years, included this narrative. She said she had done 'everything possible' to make sure she did not give birth in the home and instead went to a large hospital where, she said, she 'gave birth alone, didn't utter one sound, and was stitched afterwards' adding, however, 'it didn't feel right'. When she was pregnant with her second child, she said her doctor had been 'horrified' at her condition and remarked: 'maybe someone was trying to prevent you from having sex?'

1980s

Early in the 1980s, the Committee was told by a witness that at 17-years old, having given birth to her baby, she was being stitched by a male nurse, when in her hearing, he made a jocular comment about her to his female colleagues who were also there: 'She'll be tighter now than she was before'. They laughed.

In the decade of the 1980s, although the overall 'unplanned pregnancy' situation had improved at least a little for some, it was not the case for all. According to one witness, 'hiding the shame' was still the scenario for many unmarried mothers and their families; for instance when being brought to a hospital for a check-up, the unmarried were, according to one witness, required to enter through the side or back doors. Another report to the Committee in that context said that one girl found it necessary to wear a wig to hide her identity and shame. With 'shame' still endemic, a witness, 15 years old when she was raped and made pregnant in the early 1980s, remembers 'a lot of shame' in the atmosphere permeating the mother and baby home. 'They would put on films and make you watch videos of live abortions. The message was that we were 'good' for not having an abortion but we were 'sinners' for getting ourselves pregnant.

In the same decade one witness testified that while she was undergoing a check-up, those giving it: 'weren't very nice. They weren't far off putting a bag over your head. One nurse,' she said 'was particularly wicked and would verbally abuse [us]: 'Look at them all, bunch of bitches, trollops! 'Whore' was the favourite word down there'.

The positive changes were now becoming evident however. A woman, 29 years old when resident in a home, told the Committee that her experience in the mother and baby home was 'very positive'. She spoke highly of the home and specifically of two of the nuns who were looking after her.

The Committee heard from a woman who was 26 years old when she was admitted to a mother and baby home in this decade. However, shame and embarrassment had reared their heads again in her case and the witness's mother would not allow her to have ultra sound examinations during pre-natal check-ups, for fear her identity would be revealed. The witness reported that nevertheless she received 'good medical care' during her stay in the home and that that her experience in the home was a positive one.

This next witness was transferred to a hospital from the mother and baby home to give birth; she told the Confidential Committee, that she did so wearing a metal washer on her wedding finger to pretend she was married. The pretence included her fictional husband, 'a truck driver', who was 'out of the area'. Having been collected by a nun in a taxi to return to the home with her child, she was 'afraid' to look at her daughter, but the taxi driver told the nun to 'let the little girl hold her baby' and she did. However, when they arrived back at the home, nun and baby entered through the side door, while the witness entered alone through the main door.

A 16-year old gave birth in a hospital where she was treated well and 'the same as other mothers' whom she described as 'warm, friendly and kind' to her. She said one of the nurses tried explaining to her that the baby would be adopted but in this regard, the witness felt that they were treating her like she 'had a womb but no brain'. She became pregnant again a short time later and as she had on the previous residency in the mother and baby home, went into premature labour and was again sent back to the hospital where she suffered a breech birth; it was too late to give her an epidural anaesthetic but she was given gas and air - and a rosary beads. She went into shock, however, and was given the Last Rites. She and her child both survived - the latter subsequently spending nine weeks in an incubator.

'You had to ring a bell when you went into labour and the taxi would be called', said this next witness and 'the cruellest thing was that you would travel in it alone'. If you couldn't afford the taxi-fare from this home to the hospital, she recalled you went alone on the bus. In this witness's case, on arrival at the hospital, she was rushed to theatre as her baby's heart had stopped. The emergency had been called too late. He had died before being delivered full term. The witness was granted her request to see him, but hadn't realised he would be discoloured for lack of oxygen and turned away from him, something she has regretted ever since. Her father, the birthfather and her brother assisted in bringing the baby home to be buried. He has a marked grave. But her father put only the surname on his headstone.

Another witness recalled for the Committee three kindnesses shown to her when her baby son died at birth, his shoulders having 'become stuck' during his birth. She had remained in

hospital for 'about a week' and spent a further five or six weeks recuperating in the home. Her parents collected her and brought her home. They visited the grave with her once, and the witness visits every year, while her time in the mother and baby home is still not spoken about openly, never in the family home.

The first kindness came from one of the nurses who had delivered her baby. She took two photographs of him and they are still in his mother's possession.

The nuns then gave a grave although she was too ill to attend his funeral, and a local undertaker donated a coffin.

Adoption and Consent

A number of workers who had been assigned to a mother and baby home in a professional capacity for some years during the 1970s and 1980s came to speak with the Confidential Committee about 'the culture of adoption' prevalent in mother and baby homes.

They voiced the opinion that this culture was 'systemic' and 'a belief system', in that adoption was promoted as the 'better option' and that in any event, by having come into a mother and baby home in the first place, the expectation was thereby that women would see this 'better option' as the only realistic one and therefore would select it. In addition, these professionals said, this pressure to adopt was strengthened by default because in the mother and baby homes there was 'no talk around pressure on the women to *keep their babies*'.

One social worker told the Committee that she found the 'social work piece' now to be 'ahead of the institutional piece', the main brief 'to ensure that women were allowed to take as much time as they needed to be fully informed' of decisions concerning their babies. 'The nuns were irritated by this', she said 'but they knew change was coming' and, anxious not to be 'left with babies that couldn't be adopted', were pushing to get mothers to sign *Permission to Place* forms.

It was now possible, she told the Committee, 'if you were strong-minded to keep your baby but culturally it was still hard'. While her job was to explore options and establish trust, she was struck by how 'emotionally closed down' these women were. There was still some way to go, though - there was as yet no post-adoption counselling, for instance, and the secrecy surrounding most women's stays in a home continued to permeate the attitudes of families and of Irish society in general.

Sometimes, they added, having opted for giving up their babies, mothers could have a change of heart after the child was born; but it was 'very difficult' to switch choices at that stage, not only because the process was probably already in train, but because it usually meant that the new mother had to plead with her family, who were in most cases expecting adoption to have taken away 'the problem', to allow her to come home

with her child. She would also have to ask for support, moral and financial, for both of them.

From the time pregnancy was discovered, or was about to 'show', many women and girls were banished from view, staying out of it all the way through giving birth and its immediate aftermath. Customarily at the behest of families (or, rarely, on their own initiative if they were more mature) they were sequestered behind the walls of mother and baby homes, coming home - if they were allowed home - with no baby to be seen or even mentioned, the story for neighbours and wider family carefully prepared. As already mentioned, these daughters were 'going to or returning from boarding school' or from 'work experience' in distant towns; from 'working in England' - or from 'living with an aunt and uncle for a few months in London' - or elsewhere, remote from her home.

It did happen that a mother could disappear altogether by being banished for good by her family with a one-way ticket to the UK or the USA and a 'don't come back' edict ringing in her ears.

It is probably worth reiterating a particularly novel scenario invented by one family in cooperation with a daughter's school: she, they told everyone, was on an exploratory trip to a UK convent. It and the school being run by the same order, she was checking out the terms and conditions involved in 'entering' to research her vocation.

And of course when again she was to be seen back at school and around the place, there was a very simple and credible explanation: the trip had been worthwhile because she had discovered, before it was too late, she hadn't a vocation after all.

Those professionals who came to the Committee insisted that they never saw women having their babies taken without their explicit consent. They added there were some women, conflicted about which choice to make, who abandoned their babies in the home because they were unable to choose, a quandary illustrated by the story of one new mother who had faced it.

This mother had left the mother and baby home without her child who, after a year in the home, was placed with a family. However, she changed her mind: she wanted the baby placed in an orphanage so she could visit. Before that could happen, though, she changed her mind a second time and decided to take the infant back. By this stage, these professionals pointed out, this child had spent a year in the home, six months in an adoption placement, and had then gone to live in a flat with the mother and her boyfriend. Then, following a third change of mind, the child was placed in a nursery to wait for an adoption to go through.

The baby had four different placements within its first two years. When this mother finally signed consent papers, an Adoption Order was made by the courts, which made a fifth placement.

The professionals who came to the Committee indicated that some of those who had rowed back on their original decision to choose adoption and had attempted to keep their children, were the ones who were subject to the greatest pressure. These pressures became intolerable because they were not just from the nuns in the homes, but from what was, in practice, an alliance of authorities, including their families (in many cases assisted by priests) all members of which were angry at the change of heart and adamant that adoption had been the first and was now the only choice.

In some cases, this pressure was couched morally: ('You're being selfish; your baby will have a great life with a lovely family and will get a great education. What can someone like you offer?') Some women reported a baby being 'snatched' from their arms before final adoption papers were completed; while other witnesses reported that they had not been told in advance that after birth, their babies had been tagged for adoption in nurseries and were available for 'viewing'.

There were many stories voiced by women about not being given adequate (or any) warning of an imminent handover, and not being given the opportunity even to say 'Goodbye'. All these women and girls professed themselves 'heartbroken'.

Some women who came to the Confidential Committee testified that they willingly gave up their babies for adoption, signed all papers necessary and got on with their lives. This, they told the Committee, had been the definite plan from the time they discovered they were pregnant and residency in a mother and baby home had been merely a necessary stop along the way.

In earlier times, with rare exceptions, most of the men and boys who fathered these children were nowhere to be found after their girlfriends gave them the 'bleak news'; acknowledging fatherhood of 'illegitimate' offspring, even when the sex was consensual, was not common in Ireland during those years, however the pregnancy had occurred, and in the end a large number of these mothers were left alone to suffer and struggle while making their 'choices'.

1940s - 1950s

A witness born in 1944 in a home - and who grew up in state care - came to the Committee to recount what his birthmother had told him, disclosing that for four years, she had said, in an effort to ensure he would not be adopted, she had paid the nuns in the mother and baby home to care for him as she did not want him to be 'farmed out' and believed that by having him in a home where she could visit him, she was 'doing the right thing'. She also believed, he said, that when he was later sent to an industrial school, that he would receive a good education, (and she 'had had no idea' she said, 'that it was such a terrible place'.)

During all this time, he told the Committee, his birthmother wrote to him, sent him money, and regularly promised to take him out of the school: 'But this never happened'. No happy ending here, unfortunately: when mother and son finally met in later life, he said, 'she was a stranger to me', and that the connection between them subsequently was 'very tenuous'.

Then there was the witness, who came to the Committee to say that in 1949, she was born in a mother and baby home, and following an unsuccessful fostering placement, also grew up in State care. She recounted how her mother had told her that while they were both in the home, a couple from the USA had travelled from there to 'view' her in her nursery but were 'refused permission to adopt because the nuns didn't like them'.

She was two and a half years old when she was (again) 'dressed up' for another couple visiting who were there looking for a foster child. She said that was the last she and her birthmother saw of each other until they were reunited later in life, this coming as a surprise, she said, because: 'Throughout my childhood, I had been told that my

mother was dead'. Her fostering broke down and she was then placed, through the courts, in an industrial school at the age of five. This witness lived in that institution until she was 16 years old. In any event, she and her mother eventually met, the latter saying that she had had no idea where her daughter had gone or what had happened to her.

The witness filled her in about what had happened - including the news that her foster parents had apparently made an application to adopt her but this had been refused since the child's birthmother 'could not be located'. This, the Committee was told by the witness, had been a 'blatantly untrue' invention, because, she explained the nuns had 'sent her mother to work in the UK and had always known where she was' mainly because she had kept contact, hoping to 'get her daughter back' once she was married. This ambition had been blighted because her mother had been told simply that 'this would not be possible'.

Making the decision on whether or not to choose the adoption 'option' caused great distress, even agony, to very many women, a huge number of whom told the Committee that although the 'giving away' of their children could not now be undone, they are still highly conflicted about whether the decision they made at the time (or gave in to having it made for them) was the right one.

A parish priest decreed to a woman's parents that their daughter must not come home after giving birth to her son in a home. Her father collected her and brought her, not to their home, but to her sister's, and from there she was sent directly to the UK, where she remained with her brother and another sister for more than seven years. She has 'no idea' what happened to her son, she told the Committee, and presumes he was adopted, but doesn't remember signing papers and if she did, insists she had no idea that she was signing him away. She was 21 years old when she had him.

Some birthmothers did fight bravely but, at such a vulnerable juncture of their lives, many, thinking of their families as well as their babies (never mind their own emotional welfare and stability) were unable to stand up to the pressures imposed.

A witness born in 1949 who had been adopted to the USA from the mother and baby home successfully traced her birthmother in later life. She found her mother reluctant to speak in detail of her time in the home - except to say that after giving birth to the witness, she had spent four months with her.

Her birthmother said that her adoption had been organised entirely by correspondence, through 'Catholic Charities' - and that the adopters had never been to Ireland. Her parents, she said, had paid \$1500 to adopt her, had verified they could 'provide for her' and gave assurances that she would be 'raised as a Catholic'. She told the Committee that they had been required to continue paying 'donations' until she was 16 years old. It was 'by accident' she discovered she was adopted. She said she had 'grave concerns' that her birthmother was not aware what she was signing when completing the paperwork as she was illiterate at the time.

That birthmother was just one of a number who said they were illiterate at the time they had allegedly signed adoption papers. This next witness also told the Committee that she couldn't read or write. She was raised in state care, was assaulted by a priest and having fallen pregnant, she went into a mother and baby home in 1956, to have her daughter. Like others in this sequence, she insisted that to her knowledge, she 'hadn't signed any documents'. In any event, she said, during the 12 months she had spent in the home looking after her baby, 'there had been no talk of adoption'.

After that 12 months, she had returned to the institution in which she had been living prior to admission to the home - leaving her daughter behind to be cared for. Later, she got a job, moved into a flat and then went back to the home to collect her daughter. She was not there, and no-one would say where she had gone.

The witness then went to the adoption agency she presumed had been involved in taking her child out of the home, but it claimed to have no record of a relevant adoption. (However, when this daughter traced the witness in later life, it emerged that the witness and her adoptive family had been living relatively close to each other.) This mother went on to have another pregnancy, resulting in twins and they too, were born in a home. When she asked for them, she was told that they, like her daughter 'were gone'. To her this phraseology meant that they had died at birth. Some years later, these twins traced the witness just as her first child had.

Earlier in the 1950s, a 16 year old girl became pregnant, she said, having been raped by a priest. She too went into a home and had her baby there, and then: 'A nun took my baby away', she said to the Committee, 'and that was the last I saw of him. It was terrible the way they took the child away without telling you (this was going to happen).' As in previous stories, this witness said she later saw an adoption record which appeared to have her signature on it. 'I couldn't have signed it', she told the

Committee 'because at the time, I didn't know how to read or write'. She acquired these skills she said, only after leaving the home.

One witness told the Committee that at the time of her birth, her adoptive father was working for an order of nuns, who suggested to him that he adopt a baby girl. He told her that 'he drove to a chapel yard where he met two nuns who arrived in a taxi and handed me over'.

This woman told the Committee she had no idea she had been adopted until she was applying for a passport in 2011, although her husband knew because this had been revealed to him by her adoptive parents. Not only that, but she discovered that 'for many people in the locality', her status 'was well known', something she continues to find upsetting. 'Terribly shocked and hurt', was how she described her reaction to this news. She confronted her adoptive father, who said they didn't tell her 'because they considered me to be theirs'.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, who am I?' she said to the Committee: 'Everybody knew and I didn't know a thing. It changed me to tell you the truth'.

An 18-year old who entered a home to give birth, also in the 1950s, had been taken into an orphanage, when she was six years old, together with her five siblings, when their mother died. When, at 18 years of age it was found she was pregnant, she 'didn't know what the word meant'; and when the doctor recommended she go into a mother and baby home, she didn't know what that was either. Having given birth to a baby boy, she remembers being called to the office of the Reverend Mother and being told to sign a 'single-page' document, the contents or meaning of which, she told the Confidential Committee, 'was not read or explained' to her. All she was told, she said, was: 'Your son is going to be adopted'. She did what she was told and signed.

Her son was three and a half years old, before one of the nuns said to her 'it's happening'; she didn't have time to say goodbye, but did have time to run upstairs and watch him leave from the window. 'Being parted from him broke my heart'. She wrote

subsequently to her father and brother asking for help but never heard back from either. This woman said she believed the State should apologise to the women who were coerced into adoption or, like her, were uninformed when they consented to the process as, she said, this had caused “unspeakable damage”.

Another witness came to the Committee to say that the life of her birthmother, who gave birth to the witness in a home in 1950 when she was 23 years old, ‘was made hell’ because she had refused to sign adoption forms for the witness in favour of yet another couple who had travelled from the USA to view her. ‘To put it crudely’, this witness said, ‘the home had lost out on a sale’. For such stubbornness, said the witness, her birthmother ‘was forced to stand in front of a statue to pray for guidance for so long that she passed out’. But this is another of these stories that ends kindly because neighbours of the birthmother’s family told the nuns that they would take in both mother and baby and ‘after payment of a fee’, both were ‘released’ into their care.

One witness said that in the home, she was told that her daughter was ‘going to be leaving’, so, sadly, she wrote her a note expressing her love and attached it to the child’s nappy. Out of the blue she was then told “your money has been stopped from the Government” - and that to get it back, she had to go downtown ‘to sign for it’.

She was brought, she said, to an ‘old shop’ in the town, and told to sign a document ‘partially covered’ by the person who offered it to her so she couldn’t see what she was signing. She now believes these were adoption papers. When she got back to the home, she found that her baby was gone. This mother was persistent, however, and sometime later, after she had left the home, she telephoned it to look for information as to where her baby had gone. The nun, who had sent her downtown to that ‘old shop’, was abrupt, claiming: ‘there are no babies here, never mind adoptions! Now don’t call back!’

Years afterwards, the witness recognised the voice of this nun when she was giving a radio interview. She telephoned again, but was again treated tersely: ‘You are mistaken. This was not a mother and baby home’. Undeterred, however, she went physically to meet this Sister - who initially denied that the witness had ever been in the home. This witness did not give up easily and directly confronting the nun, ordered her to ‘find my daughter’ while informing her that she herself was searching. Her daughter was found.

1960s

In the mid-1960s, a woman of mixed-race parentage was adopted into a white family and struggled right from the beginning with 'knowing I was different'. When she was in school, the other children would taunt her, calling her by the names of characters in the popular TV series *Roots* (about the slave trade and the struggles of African slaves sold to America). In later life, from the perspective of this adoptee and many others, the flaws and failings in the adoption system rose to confound her when she became seriously ill. Investigations showed that the illness was related to her racial background, and because she does not know the identity of her birthfather she is unable to investigate it any further.

Having been raised in an orphanage, this next witness was raped, became pregnant, and went into a home. Two supportive sisters living and working in the UK, had finally saved enough to pay her fare to come to the UK, with her baby, to live with them. They came to visit her in the home to give her the good news. 'But the nuns overheard this conversation', the witness told the Committee, and one morning, shortly afterwards, she was ordered to dress her baby and was brought, with the baby, to an adoption agency. The baby was separated from her and she was locked into a room, from where she could hear her child was being given to a couple - she could hear the child crying and in distress but she couldn't get out of the room to go to him. She told the Committee that she 'hadn't consented in any way' to her child being taken away from her.

One witness, having resisted all pressures and brought her baby home recounted that while walking along a street with the child, both had been ordered into the car of a priest - he had drawn up alongside her, ordered her to get in, and when she did, drove straight to a home. On arrival, she and the baby were separated and the pressure immediately began for her to sign adoption papers. The witness was locked into a room and told she would stay there until she signed the adoption papers for her baby.

She told the Committee she 'kicked and kicked' that door and 'wouldn't stop kicking and yelling,' demanding release, to see

her baby, and that her father should be called. She kept it up until eventually the priest arrived back and tried again, through the locked door, to get her to sign papers, even shoving the papers under it, enticing her with a promise she could leave as soon as she signed, then changing tack and calling her a 'selfish whip! But she continued to yell, protest and clamour for release.

Eventually her father was summoned and he took her home with her baby. A short time later, she left her child with her mother and father while she went back to work in the UK. Not long afterwards, however, she got a panicked phone call from her parents: this priest had been calling to the house, threatening guardianship proceedings against her. She came home to collect her daughter.

Another witness told the Committee that she gave birth in a mother and baby home in the late 1960s and described the following. Having said to a nun in the home that her plan was to go to England with her baby to stay with her sister, the response to the witness was: 'That doesn't happen here. You'll do what we tell you and that's it. You're not keeping that baby. You're going nowhere with that baby. You're going home and the baby is going somewhere else'. The witness told the Committee that after that conversation, the nun contacted the sister of the witness to tell her that the witness had decided to have her baby adopted. 'This', the interviewee said, 'was not true'.

She was then, she said, 'brought to a room with a chair and a desk where I was told to sign the piece of paper put in front of me' and when she refused to comply, she said, she was 'dragged down the corridor by the nun to an office where I was *made* to sign the paper'. After this, she and another mother from the home were brought to what she thinks was a solicitor's office where she 'swore an oath and signed another document and paid the solicitor half a crown'.

Later again, along with her baby, she was brought to 'another place'. Where the nun said to her: 'You'll be off now in a minute, so put that child down in the basket'. The witness would not do this and again insisted: 'I'm keeping my baby'. However, this nun took the infant from her, placed her in the basket, ordering: 'Off you go now!'

This story has a sequel. Many years later, this witness received documents related to her child's adoption and read letters in her name which stated she was putting her child up for adoption. 'I did not write those letters', she told the Confidential Committee, 'and did not get anyone else to write them for me'.

This next witness claims she was blackmailed. One day, in the early 1960s when she was 16 years old and having given birth to a baby in a mother and baby home, she was told by the nuns that her grandmother was dying and that she should go and visit her. When she arrived home, she found that her grandmother was not dying. She also found that it had been her mother, in concert with the nuns in the home, who had arranged for her to be absent so that her baby could be taken quietly. 'I think of my baby as having been kidnapped', she said to the Confidential Committee.

Later, her parents wrote to her in the UK, where she and her boyfriend, her child's birthfather, were 'trying to get things together' so they could get the baby back and set up home. In that letter, her parents wrote that she had 'one week' *to sign adoption papers or the baby will end up in an orphanage*. 'That', she said, 'was blackmail'.

This next witness, who gave birth to a baby boy in 1965, was told from the start that her baby would be going to the USA and was never allowed to touch him or speak about him. Like many others, she has no memory of ever signing anything, nor was anything explained and as the years passed, she 'sometimes questioned whether she had even had a child'. However, her son traced her and it transpired that he had not gone to the USA as she had been told, but had been adopted locally.

Then there was the witness who discovered that her daughter's name on her Baptismal Certificate was her adoptive name, despite the adoption not having taken place until months after the sacrament was held.

But here is a witness who had a 'happy upbringing with very caring (adoptive) parents' who nevertheless told the Committee: 'You had to accept that at one stage you weren't wanted'.

The birthmother of another witness became pregnant while being treated in a psychiatric hospital. This witness was told by a nurse who had taken care of her

mother in the unit, that she had been 'too ill to understand what was happening around her, or to sign papers;' the witness is convinced that none had been signed. She added, 'the Adoption Board didn't inform me that my mother had been a psychiatric patient'.

Another witness said that before her daughter was taken away, she had a photograph of her daughter taken and took a lock of her hair, and when she got home, she hid both in 'her mother's cupboard'. A few weeks later, however, she realised that they were gone and told the Committee that 'a sibling had taken them. It was the cruellest thing done to me. That was all I had'.

On a more positive note, a witness, adopted locally in the 1960s, told the Committee that he had had a 'happy upbringing' with parents who had always said to him that he was special, because they had picked him. 'You were loved twice', they said, explaining that his birthmother had loved him enough to make the sacrifice of giving him up.

This birthmother, when he did meet her later, disclosed to him that she had also given birth to his 'two natural half-siblings' whom she had also placed for adoption. She hadn't been able to face them, she had said, because they had been conceived as a result of rape. He told the Committee that his natural father 'didn't want a relationship with his mother' and so she was sent by her family to the mother and baby home. But then, adding to a mystery inherent in this man's story, was the 'strong feeling' he said he had always had, that he had been a twin: 'But I have a letter that says my mother wasn't carrying twins and there is no record of twins being delivered'.

However, during their meeting, his birthmother told him that 'the remains of the stillborn baby' had been placed 'in the graveyard with the nuns'. 'I looked for a death certificate', he told the Committee, 'but I understand it wasn't the practice to issue a death cert for a stillborn child'. This witness told the Committee that he had come for interview because he was convinced that 'somewhere there is a record of my stillborn sibling'.

A witness was 24 years old when she had her baby in a home. She had hoped, she told the Committee that the birthfather would 'come up with a plan' for them to keep the baby but this did not happen.

The nun in charge told her she 'knew of a farmer looking for a good wife' but the witness insisted she would marry only the birthfather, so the nun began the adoption process telling her that the adoptive couple were 'two doctors', so the witness signed the consent forms.

She then discovered that her baby had not been adopted by doctors but by her own neighbours - assisted by the local priest. For some time afterwards, the witness, said to the Committee, when at Mass, she would see her little girl with the neighbours, her child's adoptive parents, when they attended at church. She had to watch her grow little by little, until they moved away sometime later.

A witness, 17 years old when she gave birth in a mother and baby home in the early 1960s, told the Confidential Committee that she was 'mentally tortured' and 'horrified' that she had given her child up for adoption - and equally tortured with worry that her husband and children might find out that she had given birth to this baby or had even been in a home. She had attended counselling, she said, but had never indicated the core reason for her distress to the counsellor. Having been in a home and giving birth was never mentioned during the sessions.

In fact, before coming to the Confidential Committee, she said that she had not told a single person about her baby and now felt that 'her whole life was a lie', that she had been 'keeping secrets from the people she was supposed to love and care about'. 'I feel like a fake, she said, 'it's a terrible thing I've done. It never goes away'.

Having given birth in a home, an 18-year old was afraid to tell her parents she wanted to keep her daughter. An adoption was organised and one day with no prior notice, she was ordered to dress the baby for the handover. 'It was all organised by this adoption agency; I had to hand her in like a parcel'. Six months later, her parents brought her to a solicitor's office and: 'My father put a pen in my hand and made me sign my signature'.

One witness was 19 years old when she gave birth in 1967 in a home. She had had no idea her child would be taken - and certainly not in the way he was. Three weeks after he was born, a nun came into the nursery and 'snatched' him from her. Another

nun came to talk to her because she was 'totally distraught' but the witness 'punched her and tried to yank her veil off'. Her mother collected her from the home two weeks after that, took her to the airport to send her to an aunt and uncle in the UK and told her 'not to come back'. The witness insists she never signed an adoption consent form.

A witness had to ask for assistance, when she was unable to spell the Christian name, when she was 'told' to write it on the document she was given to sign. Having become pregnant at the age of 15, she told the Committee that her baby was registered for adoption under false names, both Christian and surname, her name also inserted incorrectly, none having any connection to the real names. These 'made-up names' were used, she was told at the time, so that she could not be traceable as having had a child, a subterfuge, she said, that had been at the behest of her mother and aunt. She returned to the home in 2004 in search of information, to be told that 'no baby boy' had been born in the home on that date. When she mentioned to the two nuns who were talking to her about having had to sign the false names on the documents to facilitate her son's adoption, the response was that 'they didn't know what she was talking about,' and 'bundled her out the door'. This witness concluded this section of her evidence by saying to the Committee: 'there was a crime committed by the nuns because they registered me and my baby in another name' adding that she had also reported the matter to the Gardaí.

The Committee noted that during the interview given by another witness, the word 'shame' was used nearly 20 times. She was 22-years old when she gave birth to her child. At the time she became pregnant she said that her overwhelming feelings were of shame - and consciousness of her parents' fears that the neighbours might find out - these feelings have permanently endured. They have prevented her from telling her subsequent marital children, grandchildren, or even friends, about her having had a baby in a mother and baby home and choosing adoption.

This next witness traced his birthmother who had been 17 years old in 1969 when she gave birth to him in a home. When this happened, she told him, her parents had brought her to a solicitor's office in a town and had ordered her to sign adoption papers, but she had refused and they left the office. The witness said that his adoptive mother told him that there had been 'some uncertainty and delay' in his adoption procedure in comparison to what she had experienced with the witness's previously adopted two siblings. Her husband had been told that this time they were getting a girl

and they were also told that when they came to the home to pick her up, they were to have the number plates on their car covered up. They complied with this, but when they arrived, 'were brought into a room and handed a boy'.

His adoptive mother had photographs taken of her new son, and asked that they be sent to the witness's birthmother. They weren't. The witness said that his adoptive mother had also offered to meet his birthmother but this offer was not allowed by the priest who was organising the process.

A possible explanation as to why these adoptive parents had been asked to cover their car's registration number was expressed by a mother who, at another time had been watching through a window in the home as a car took her baby. As she watched, she said to the Confidential Committee, she was told 'that wasn't the car of the adoptive parents'.

That mother said that in her opinion, she had been told that to prevent any attempts she might make in the future to trace her baby.

But here is a woman who was 26 years old in 1969 when she went into a mother and baby home to have her daughter. She told the Committee that she had had 'a very positive experience;' that going into the home and having her child adopted was the best and only option she had at the time. The birthfather had promised marriage but had let her down and her mother had threatened that if she returned home with a baby, she would be thrown out.

Although she had a good job, she admitted that she had gone into 'a very dark place' when she discovered she was pregnant and felt she had 'nowhere to turn'. In desperation she had sought the help of the priest who had been due to conduct her marriage. He had made contacts with relevant agencies and she was 'very grateful'. In the home, she told the Committee, they too were, 'very understanding of my situation'.

She did acknowledge that she had 'grieved bitterly' when leaving her child after giving birth to her and had been unprepared for the fact that it was going to be so emotionally

difficult. She did accept, she said, that at the time, adoption had been the best option for her daughter because she had not wanted her to be 'in the limbo of fostering', so even though it 'felt like a death' to her, she agreed to sign the final consent forms.

She also commented that 'families were hard on birthmothers and that 'society doesn't think about all the men who got those girls pregnant!' Although she did express a negative view of the nuns' 'lack of understanding about how difficult adoption was emotionally for birthmothers', she was less concerned about that - ('the nuns were trying to save the child from bad circumstances') - than she was about the 'villainising' of adoptive parents, of 'portraying them as snatching children away from their mothers'.

Another witness, a 21-year old mother, resisted all pressures to sign adoption papers and, defying all odds, while lugging a buggy went to 'the place where my baby was being minded' took the child, brought her to the UK and married the birthfather.

1970s

This next witness was extremely distressed during her meeting with the Confidential Committee when relating her experience of having her baby in a home in the mid-1970s at the age of 19, explaining that she had had no other option. She has had no further children because, she said, she was 'too scared to go through again what she had gone through' and she had a lot of regrets about the adoption. 'Reeling' is how she described the feelings she had about the entire experience and especially about the way the institution in which she gave birth, dealt with the adoption. Firstly, she was told to dress the baby and did so in clothes her family had crocheted. She was then instructed to go to the bathroom and get herself dressed. When she returned, her baby was gone. She contacted the adoption agency asking if she could take her baby back, and was told it was too late.

'No-one ever spoke about my child at home'. This next witness, who was 18 years old when she gave birth in the mid-1970s, had given up her child 'because I knew I was unable to mind a child and I was conscious of not ruining my boyfriend's career'. On

one occasion, she burst into tears at the family dinner table because of her sadness, 'but everyone carried on as though nothing was happening'.

A witness, 19 years old in the mid-1970s, had made a similar plan to escape with her baby from the home but when putting it into action, a nun tried to stop her. 'I said: 'You'll have to kill me to stop me. She sneered at me and said: 'we'll see how far you'll go'. But then to her astonishment this nun gave her £4 and the witness left with her baby.

This next witness gave birth to her son in 1970 when she was 21 years old. When she was back in the family home, the parish priest put pressure on her to give the baby up for adoption, warning her that 'no bastard child will enter my school'. Subsequently, 'one day, some women carrying documents' arrived at her home - she had no idea who they were. 'They gave her no choice' she said but forced her to sign the documents. This witness told the Committee that she had no idea where her child is and 'no one would tell her'.

Then there was the witness, 15 years old in 1972, when she gave birth to her child; 'one day', she said, 'one of the nuns sat me down for lunch' and by the time she got back to the nursery her baby was gone. When she left the home, 'a priest visited her, put papers in front of her and told her to 'shut her mouth and sign'. He never asked her if she understood what she was doing and she had no one to support her.

In 1974 a witness, who had a son in a home when she was 20 years old, said she had signed adoption papers before leaving as she 'knew it was the only way she could get out'. But when she got home, she telephoned to inform the nuns she had no intention of signing the final papers as she intended to keep her baby - and was met, she said to the Committee, with 'a litany of abuse'.

This nun then arrived at her house and tried to convince her that her son had 'gone to a good home' and even offered to give her the £10,000 that the adoptive family had put together to keep the baby. However, the witness stuck to her guns and refused to sign - and two days later, she was told her baby was 'ready for collection' but that she had to collect him at the back door of the home.

In 1976, a 16-year old who, a year earlier, had given birth to a child in a home and had given him up for adoption at three weeks of age, was back again. She had been living on the streets, had been raped and was now pregnant with her second son. This time, she wanted to keep her child and told the Committee that she had convinced a taxi driver to pretend he was her uncle so she could take her baby out. This worked and six months later she and her son left the home.

With the exception of one of her sisters, the family of this next witness, who took home the baby to whom she had given birth in the mid-1970s, were 'charmed' with her. She said, 'the neighbours loved her too'. While in the mother and baby home awaiting birth and having signed the first two adoption forms, she had refused to sign the third, final one. 'I said I will bring up my own child', and from then on 'it became a battle for me to hold on to my child'. The nuns, a social worker and a priest all met with her 'to force me to sign her away'. This was before her baby was born - and she said, the pressure to sign the papers continued after the birth. This witness has remained single all her life and speaking about her daughter, she said 'I live for her. She is my rock'.

A witness spoke to the Committee about being 19 years of age and pregnant in a home in the late 1970s and seeing nuns 'getting physical' with residents, wrestling babies from them in the nursery while the mothers were 'roaring that they wanted to keep their babies'.

However, one of the jobs given to this witness in this home was to look after the children who would never be adopted because they had physical or intellectual issues. 'It was like Chernobyl. They were in a room on their own. I was traumatised by it. I will remember them until I go to my grave'.

1980s

In the 1970s and 1980s, professional workers who were studying and working in mother and baby homes did sense that attitudes to unmarried mothers had begun to shift a little, especially as social workers continued to promote options other than adoptions.

However, the pace of change could be glacial. In 1985, for instance, a birthmother overheard this from the woman who was feeding the baby to whom she had just given birth in the home: ('You were discouraged from feeding your own baby', she said), but she heard this surrogate feeder say to her baby: 'Your mammy doesn't love you and she's leaving you...'

Immediately after giving birth in 1980 in a hospital, the infant daughter of an 18-year old woman was taken straight from this hospital to adoption while the witness went back to the home. The witness told the Committee that in her view there was no acknowledgment of the bond between a mother and her child that 'begins even before birth'. 'I grew up on a farm', she explained, 'I watched cows having calves and I know the bond that exists even in the animal world'. When she returned home shortly after giving birth, even though they had never discussed it, her mother, she said, 'could have kissed the ground that I had dealt with it and that was that'.

This witness was told that her baby's adoptive parents wanted to meet her but her own parents would not allow this - and she was given half an hour to write a letter to her son before she left the home without him. Up to the last minute before she left, she said, she 'held out hope' that when her parents came to collect her they would take her and the baby home with them, but this did not happen.

The witness said that when she finally signed the papers she felt like 'someone had carved her up the middle'. She went back to her studies in college, outwardly behaving 'as if nothing had happened' but she wanted to emphasise to the Committee that 'she needed a template to survive the experience and move on with her life'.

1990s

Progress in the loosening of attitudes continued to be slow and as the 1990s dawned, a witness who had her baby in a home at the age of 17 told the Committee that she

wanted it to be known that 'the same things were still happening:' Her parents wanted 'the whole thing' kept secret, they had 'a friend who worked in social services who was making the arrangements, and there were no choices offered, nor were any discussed'.

She had hoped that when her mother saw the baby it would be different, but that didn't happen and the witness said that the 'friend from social services' did tell her she had the choice to opt out of the proposed adoption, but her parents had made it clear that this was not possible. For instance, none of her siblings had been told about the pregnancy so all believed the lie that when she went into the mother and baby home, the witness had 'gone away to study'. Up to the day of her appearance before the Committee, the witness said, only one of her siblings knew that she had given birth to a baby.

So her job from the time she had given away her baby, she deduced, was simply 'to return to her life after the birth, to act as though nothing had happened - and to carry the secret to this day'.

Fostering and Boarding out

This section describes the experiences of children who were boarded out or fostered from mother and baby homes or county homes from the 1920 to the 1950s. Boarding out and fostering are fully dealt in the Commission's main report.

Female Experience

1930s / 1940s

This witness was not just resilient and optimistic, she was observant. She knew how, in a few words, to paint a picture for the Committee of what that era felt like: 'there was no joy, no happiness, it was a time of war, it was tough in Ireland, no-one playing outside, it was gloomy. 'There were no coloured doors'.

A woman born in a home in 1942 was sent to a foster mother ('a lovely woman' was how the witness described her) staying with her from the age of four until she was nine years old. But this foster mother became ill so the witness was taken back to the home for about a month and then sent to live with nuns. This experience could not have been more different from her previous one, particularly as 'one nun there would light into me every day. She was evil incarnate'.

'Fostering for money' was an issue for another witness. She had suffered 'significant physical and psychological abuse in her foster home, which had 'a lifelong effect on her'. Her foster parents, she said, believed that foster children 'were the lowest form of life', and were 'caring' only to make money. This woman told the Committee that she was an alcoholic by the time she was 16 years old, when she was taken out from this fosterage and sent to an institution, describing the move as 'like going to heaven in comparison to where I had been'.

The following witness told the Committee that she still has scars on her legs from being beaten with 'sticks' by members of both families with whom, one after the other, she

had been boarded out in the mid-1940s. Having been born into a home, her childhood, she said, 'was terribly unhappy'. When the nurse came to do inspections, she 'never asked me what was going on - and my foster families made me wear wellies to hide the blistering on my legs'.

There were other types of oppression too, insults, taunting - the lies - that for years afterwards left mental and emotional scarring, not immediately visible, on many children.

Born in the early 1940s this witness described for the Committee a childhood where physical and mental abuse were regular features of life with her 'boarded out' family, by whom she was 'beaten with a leather strap and a sally switch'. If she was 'bold' she said, she would also be told that she was being sent back to the home and was ordered to 'go and pack your case'; then, with it beside her, she would be left waiting, 'standing at the fireplace all day'.

At Christmas time, she would hang her stocking on the fireplace but on Christmas morning would find in it 'only a lump of coal'. She never received a Christmas present, and like another witness in this report, was not permitted to sit at the table with the family, or in her case to use their cups and plates. She was given a tin mug. When having her period, she was given only old rags to use and had to wash and reuse them.

Unexpectedly, this story ends kindly. When she was 16 years old, this witness left the family and got a job working in an orphanage, where, she told the Committee, 'the nuns were lovely to me'.

The next witness told how her new foster parents, a teacher and his wife who was 53 years old at the time, took her from the home in 1944. The fostering, she told the Committee was arranged by a solicitor. When thinking about it in later life, she suspected it was organised because her foster mother 'was anxious to have someone to look after her in her old age, and felt the need for 'a servant girl'. She remembers

the foster mother saying to her that 'no nice boy would want you', and when she got to see her notes from the home, there is 'no mention' of her being either adopted or fostered: 'I just slipped off the radar'.

In her foster home, she said, she had to share a bedroom with her parents until she was 13 years old and that 'they would often have sex while I was in the room'.

To judge by the stream of similar accounts of beatings and abuse of all kinds heard from witnesses in the care of the state in the 1940s, it represented a cruel decade for foster children. This next witness stayed in the mother and baby home in which she was born in 1944 until she was eight years old and was then brought to stay with an 'older couple who were nice to me'.

Tragically, her 'nice' foster parents died and she was moved to her second foster family, 'missing a lot of school from then on' because she was 'working out in the fields'. She would 'cut the turf and mind the children and be beaten', while two brothers of this family 'tried to assault me sexually'.

The next witness told how there were six 'natural' children in the family where she was placed at the age of three. She was there for ten years, she told the Committee, working as a skivvy - while being raped and sexually abused. This abuse, she said, was started by one of the sons from the time she arrived and she told the Committee that she was also 'taken' by neighbourhood men in cars.

Her 'skivvy' work entailed 'unloading turf, all the housework, and working on the family farm. The inspector, she said, would call 'very occasionally' and she was 'dressed up' for him when he did call. Once, a neighbour gave her money for 'helping out' - but her 'boarded out' mother took it from her. She had a teddy bear, the only present she had ever been given and it had been from her birthmother. Her 'boarded out' mother took it from her.

Allied to the 'early life' experience of the previous witness, was the broadly similar one lived by the woman who was boarded out in 1948 from a home at the age of five months and who stayed with her boarded out family until she was 12 years old. One of her comments to the Committee was that 'the older you get, the angrier you get'. Her story is that her foster parents were 'totally inappropriate' to foster her - the woman was 70 and her husband was 80 years old. They would keep her at home from school

to 'mind' them - and along with a 12-year old boy (who was also 'boarded out' with them) all three 'sexually and physically abused' her. In addition, she said, this couple 'would allow other men to come to the house and pay ten bob to rape me'. She was moved from this home to a children's home when she was 12 years old. When the nuns there realised how far behind she was educationally, she was 'put to work, morning and night and had to 'hand over her earnings' to them'.

When this witness married and went on to have her own family, she had 'serious difficulties in bearing children because of the 'internal trauma and abuse' she had suffered and has now 'only one living child'. Bearing witness to the resilience of the human spirit, she left Ireland to train as a nurse in the UK and her fury with this family is equalled only by her anger towards the state, telling the Committee that this family 'had never been vetted' and that during her time with them, there were no checks made on her. She said, if there had been, it might have been discovered how she was 'being used as a child prostitute'.

At the age of eight in 1945, this witness did not want to leave the home as she had been 'very happy' there, but abruptly found herself boarded out with a family and immediately, from that age, being subjected to 'extreme sexual abuse' from 'various members' of it. She told the woman who would come to inspect the house, 'but she never listened'. She also told her 'boarding out' mother, but she 'didn't listen' either. Later she tried to bring one of the 'natural children' in the house to court for his part in the abuse, but 'the Gardaí wouldn't touch him'.

She was 'rarely' allowed to attend school and never did any exams. 'My young life was ruined', she said to the Committee, 'and that's all I can remember of the past'. She does remember, however, that on his deathbed, her boarding-out father said to her: 'We should apologise for what we did'.

This former foster child reported to the Committee about being 'whipped' by her foster brother until 'blood was running down my legs'. She told the Committee that in addition to these 'regular beatings,' she had also been 'regularly' abused sexually by another of her foster brothers in their home - and on one occasion, as a result ended up in hospital. She suspects now that she might have been having a miscarriage

but is unsure about that because at the time 'I hadn't a clue about periods or anything'.

'There's no words there for me to tell you how bad it was,' said this next witness to the Confidential Committee - one of several who testified that she had never before spoken about the sexual and physical abuse she suffered in her childhood: 'Telling people would hurt too many, this is the first opportunity I've had to say how it was for me without affecting anyone'.

In the mid-1950s she had been 'taken in' from the home in which she'd been born by her maternal aunt and the aunt's husband - although she was never formally adopted. From the ages of 3 to 13 years, this uncle sexually abused her; From then on, he switched to abuse 'of a physical nature'. 'There were so many times I wanted to die. As a young child I prayed that he would be killed, because of the terror I would have'. When she was making her first holy communion, this child thought she was dying 'because she was 'sinful'. She fainted after receiving. 'Developmentally', she concluded, 'that was my life, not much room in it for anything else'.

This next witness was fostered from a home when she was two years old in the late 1950s. She told the Committee that her foster parents had a 'dysfunctional relationship and that there was 'violence and mental abuse' in the home. She is angry that children were 'farmed out' to such unsuitable parents, despite weekly visits from an official. On one occasion she asked her foster mother why she was fostered, this woman replied: 'Well I couldn't get a dog so I got you'.

This evidence was in stark contrast to that of the witness who came to the Committee to say that she was fostered and later adopted by 'a good, ordinary, decent family' and had a 'happy, normal childhood'.

This next witness was five or six years old when fostered out from a home in the early 1950s 'from one hell hole into another'. Her foster family were farmers 'and they turned me into a work horse and a wild animal. My father would rape me every chance he got, and my mother would beat me; she would lock me in a room and cycle off, and my father would take me out of the room and into his room'. This witness does not remember eating any dinner in that house, 'only porridge and jam' - they turned me

into a wild savage and with two others on that farm who had suffered similarly, at the age of 9 or 10 she was sent to a convent: 'We were all crazy'.

The witness was transferred into a psychiatric hospital at the age of 13, because she had hit back when one of the nuns in the convent hit her. Poignantly, this witness told the Committee that 'the only place I ever felt loved as a child, was in that mental hospital', where the nurses 'were nice to me and gave me cigarettes'.

Male experience

1920s / 1930s

A man, born in the late 1930s, spoke about the general ethos for children in Ireland in the decades under review and not just for those in care: 'You grew up in fear all the time. You were afraid of school. I served mass - I was afraid of the priest. You had fear all the time'. (Not just of 'the priest' but of the Master, the Nun and the Christian Brother).

Another coming from a man born in 1947 who was called 'a bastard child' in school, always 'felt like an outcast' and whenever asked questions about his family: 'I was all the time telling lies'.

A third quote taken from the testimony of a witness who had also been born in that decade: 'The psychology of being a bastard is deep in the Irish psyche and has stayed with me throughout my life'.

Given how many witnesses were heard, and at such length, as already implied this report cannot be exhaustive or give full details of all disclosures to the Confidential Committee.

Inevitably, though, there were major similarities in the disclosures as witnesses reported how they were treated while in care. The Committee heard that it was not just the cruelty, mental and physical or the sexual abuse and brutality that caused the deepest wounds - horrific as they were - but what cut even deeper was ignorance and indifference to individual suffering and needs.

A ninety year old man came to speak to the Confidential Committee of having been in state care during much of his childhood. It was unusual but not unknown that while he had been born in a mother and baby home in Ireland in the late 1920s, much of this care was in the UK where he was sent when he was four years old, having been moved around between institutions somewhat those first four years.

This witness was just a year old when sent to be 'boarded out' from the home, to live in the community with a woman who would, under inspection and supervision, look after him as her own and when the time came, send him to school. He had few memories of that period because three years later, when he was four years old, he was sent to an orphanage in the UK (and continues to attend its reunions.) From there he was again 'boarded out' this time for five years and from there, was finally sent to a 'training farm', where everything changed for him and, he told the Committee, his life became 'extremely rough'.

He suffered the physical assaults common to these reports, but what was most upsetting was that he was treated and 'thought of' as a 'lesser human being' by the family who ran this farm; they made their attitude to him clear by leaving him, for example, to eat his Christmas dinner alone in the kitchen, while they celebrated theirs in the dining-room of the house they 'shared' with him. Although having developed 'identity issues' throughout this peripatetic existence of being shuffled around with no say in any of it ('what am I doing? I'm no-one. I'm no-where') this man found structure in his life by joining the British army; he trained as a nurse, and then 'ran a hostel for alcoholics'.

Another witness discovered he was 'illegitimate' only when his daughter, on his behalf in the mid-1990s, began a tracing search for his mother and found his birth certificate and he also discovered he had had three sisters and two brothers with his birthmother - who had died, unfortunately, five years before this revelation. While he told the Committee that he was 'sad he had never met his mother' he believes that it is good not to dwell on the 'terrible things of the past', far better to 'live in the day'. To do otherwise, he said, 'is a cancer of the brain'.

A man born in the Ireland of the 1930s, told the Committee he was fostered through a number of foster homes from the age of 14 months. He was placed as a 'farm labourer' at the age of 16, where he was compelled to live in a shed on the land for a number of years before he joined the army.

1940s

Witnesses described how as children in abusive settings they were left to cope alone without any help from their families or the state bodies. Some men, who had been boarded out as children joined the army in either Ireland or the UK. Many went on to marry but could not cope with the intimacy of that institution, or had trust issues: 'The marriage broke down'; 'the marriage didn't last'; 'there were difficulties in the marriage' were common refrains in the interview room. In later life, some sank into alcoholism or drug use in an effort to blot out the recurring nightmares of their early experiences.

This next piece of evidence given to the Confidential Committee came from a man whose mother was 18 years old when she gave birth to him in a home in the late 1930s. He learned much later that for some time she sent money to cover his upkeep. From his birth home, he was transferred to a second one and then was sent to a foster home.

Growing up there, he said he never got Christmas or birthday presents and 'I didn't know what Santa Claus was'. But his life changed when he met his wife. 'I didn't know what true love was until I met my wife'. He was not only very happy with her, but by getting to know her family, 'learned about how family operated. His wife's family 'embraced' him he said, and 'when that door opened, the love oozed out. I'd never seen this before. Had never got hugged, never got kissed'.

This wholehearted, generous outpouring of love served also to illuminate the barrenness of his earlier life. Referring sadly to it with what might also have been even a small tinge of bitterness, he said to the Committee: 'We were fostered out for money'.

This next witness was traced by a sibling but he wanted to have a relationship with her only 'if she is kept secret'. She hasn't contacted their birthmother, fearful that it would be 'too much of a shock for her'.

Meanwhile, a snippet of how one small adventure paid off for a witness who had tried to run away from his troubles but was caught by the Gardaí and returned. He subsequently managed to stow away on a boat and ended up in Wales. He went on to work in manufacturing and learned a trade through the Open University.

This next boy, however, born in a home in 1940 was placed 'inappropriately' he said, with a foster mother and father, aged, respectively, 67 and 72 years old. Their home had neither electricity nor water, and his main job, he said, was to ferry buckets of

water into the house. He remained at this posting until he was 16 years old and 'all things considered, he said, 'did quite well'.

When he was leaving (National) school, his headmaster asked him what he was going to do about his education, encouraging him 'to keep learning'. Unfortunately, before he could get the results of the Civil Service exams he sat, his foster mother fell and broke her hip so he gave up the notion of a (white-collar) career and took a job with a local butcher.

This next witness verbalised a portrait of profound sadness and loneliness. He was born in 1940 and when he was two and a half years old, he was sent from the home 'to fill the gap' for parents whose son had been tragically killed. Then he was sent to an orphanage when he was four years old, remaining there for years, 'with occasional visits back to the couple' with whom he had been living.

He would be 'overjoyed' when sent to see them but was then 'totally confused' when he had to go back to the orphanage, as he had thought he was their son and couldn't understand 'why I didn't remain with them. I thought there was something wrong with me. I was forsaken'. (That word, he told the Committee, was the only one that could illustrate that feeling of 'loss and loneliness'.) In the 1970s and 1980s when he discovered the true details of his past, this man suffered a breakdown. He had married, he said, but his wife 'knew nothing of it'.

This next witness was fostered by an older couple. Their son was 'threatening' to the witness. On one occasion when they were cutting turf together he told the witness he 'was going to put him in a bag and throw him into the bog'. He told the Committee that his foster mother was 'nicer' to him, citing as evidence that while he was being whipped by the son, the belt leaving welts and marks all over his legs and bottom, she would urge her son 'to leave him alone'. This son, he said, was also 'cruel' to the animals on the farm, for instance kicking them, and he was also aware that he was 'molesting children'.

Despite the fact that the family received an allowance for him he had very few possessions - shoes to wear only for going to Mass and at all other times he wore wellingtons. No-one knew what he was going through as he was not allowed to visit the neighbours and forbidden to talk to anyone; he 'fared poorly' in school where the

teachers were 'horrible' to him, regularly 'hitting' him - and in any case, he was frequently taken out of class by the foster family to work on the farm.

This witness stayed on that farm until he was 31 years old. Although he was 'always tempted to leave' he said, he had become 'institutionalised' and 'fearful of the unknown'. He did marry and have his own children (and would never allow his foster brother into his own home.) He discovered when he scrutinised documents relating to his birth, that after his birthmother left the home where she had given birth to him, she had spent most of her life in a Magdalen laundry.

In the matter of being 'a bastard' and being judged in Ireland by where you were born rather than the person you are, the man born into a home in the 1940s won't easily forget a taunt he suffered in a pub. He was with friends celebrating his imminent wedding when a man sidled up to him, leering: 'You'd better invite me to the wedding. I'm your father!'

In 1945, a baby was 'boarded out' from the home when he was 'seven or eight' years old to 'very bad, very hard' people, who were 'very wealthy and Catholic' and who had four natural children, all older than he was, 'doing no work on the farm'. He told the Committee that the work he had to do on this farm 'would nowadays be considered as slavery and if you opened your mouth, you would get a whip across the face'.

He would be given only 'leftovers' to eat - and would often subsist on the 'potato skins thrown out for the pigs'; he was not allowed to use the toilet in the house, and would he kept out of school to work on the farm, his foster family writing 'sick notes' to the master. Sometimes he did manage to get away to visit his foster sister's home and she was 'good' to him. Eventually, he escaped to the UK, where he trained in a trade and went on to 'make a good life' for himself.

There were two major escape hatches for distressed men and boys during this era and it is striking how many of them told the Confidential Committee how they stepped through the first one to 'join the army' both here and in Britain, speaking warmly of the experience. These witnesses contrasted their old lives with this new one, where they now had food, warm clothing, a bed, and structure added to their lives, that up to then in many cases had been chaotic, full of all kinds of physical suffering and with fear and hopelessness in equal measure dominating thoughts about the future.

The other hatch opened onto the mail boat on the Dublin docks, or its equivalent elsewhere in the country, taking escapees across the Irish Sea and into the UK. It was availed of by many, including girls, especially if they had relatives settled there who were willing to offer transitional help.

Britain offered not just bigger territory, but a far larger population within which to hide and gain anonymity even during the war and post-war periods where frugality and food rationing ruled. So the way of life during those years wasn't easy. On balance, however, when set against institutional suffering in the Irish state care system, even living under the Blitz and the lean years afterwards was preferable - with the prospect of personal freedom and independence beckoning those who had never experienced either. Some fell by the wayside, of course, but many, for the first time in their lives, were at least cognisant of the opportunities, big and small, that came their way. Some grasped them, some didn't (or couldn't.) Even if only on the surface, they now enjoyed the privilege of being able to make personal choices.

This next witness, who was born in the late 1940s, had 6 siblings in his foster family, the progeny of his foster parents. This new child was expected to fetch water from the well in the middle of the night if his foster father felt like a cup of tea - and had to supply tea for him and his friends who would come to play cards. He would be fed the potatoes that were given to the pigs. In the mornings before school, he would take the hens' eggs, place them in the fire and take them with him to school. His teacher noticed this and would give him sandwiches and milk - but if he was late home from school, the father would whip him.

In 1963, he was moved to another foster family and suspects this was because it was noticed that he was being maltreated in the first one. This new family were wealthy dairy farmers, with two sons already in University. He was paid £1 a week, and 'put sleeping in a shed, working from six in the morning [before school] and until midnight (after school) pulling turnips, bringing in the cows, washing, milking and feeding them, delivering the milk door-to-door. On one occasion, he was told to go into town on a bike to fetch groceries; a Garda noticed there was no light on the bike and summoned him to court. The foster father 'fined' him, taking his weekly £1 from him to 'teach him a lesson'.

This witness was another who escaped all this by joining the army and didn't know himself: 17 pounds a week, 3 meals a day, a bed, a uniform, and work finished every

day at 4.30 in the afternoon'. In 1998, he eventually did meet his mother, forging 'a good relationship' with her until she died.

Another witness eventually moved to UK but not before his life beforehand, as related to the Committee, had encompassed almost all of the worst elements of state care. This man said he had come forward 'quite reluctantly' to tell his story and 'nearly didn't'. He was born into a home in 1945. At the age of 'about three' he was fostered out but then returned to the home when the couple had their own child. This couple, he said, 'didn't feed me but didn't harm me'. At the age of eight and a half years old, he was sent to his second foster home, where there were sons and a mother but no father.

One of the sons, 'about 45 years of age', regularly 'came into the bed' of the witness. A second was a 'bit of a fiddler too', and a third was 'an alcoholic'. At school, the witness was 'treated like a piece of shit and was caned every day'. 'Even the other children would line up after school to beat me.

In this second foster home, he was again 'not fed properly' and would 'eat anything I could get my hands on, even the pigs swill'. 'Everyone in the village knew I was malnourished but didn't care as I was seen as the devil's child'. This was the witness, who was only once during his fostering given new clothes - for his confirmation - 'and they were taken back off me as soon as the ceremony was over and returned to the shop'. Nothing was ever explained to him about what was dangerous about working on the farm 'and I was put in many dangerous situations, with live cables and the like'; he had 'a number' of accidents.

There were eyes and ears everywhere in this Ireland of the Forties: 'I would go to confession in the village and the next day the policeman would know everything I said and would punish me. 'I would be blamed for anything that went wrong in the village - the policeman would kick me in the hip'. He has 'no memory' of any inspections of the foster home. Perhaps the unkindest cut of all came courtesy of his foster mother: over the years, she had regularly promised him: 'if you are good and do all our chores, your mother will come and visit you'. This witness told the Committee that every Sunday, he would wait in anticipation of his birthmother coming to visit him, but 'this never happened'.

By doing odd jobs 'on the side' he eventually managed to save enough money to 'get on a cattle boat and start a new life in England'. By the time he traced his birthmother,

she was dead. He told the Confidential Committee that he had never wanted to know anything about his birthfather as 'the men of Ireland used to get away with murder. They were never to blame'.

In the 1950s, a male witness was placed with a couple who were under the age of 30. They emigrated and raised him abroad - never going the legal route of adopting him. As a child he was also exceptionally lonely because both parents were 'golf fanatics' and so he spent 'all' his time alone.

This witness is 'very angry and distressed' because of his childhood and past, saying that his 'adoptive' father was an alcoholic and a 'very violent man' and because he believes these people should not have been allowed to 'remove him from the country of his birth and his cultural heritage'.

Born in a home in 1946, this witness's only memory of his mother and baby home, he told the Confidential Committee is of his being 'walked out of it' by a nun when he was nearly five years of age and bound for 'boarding out'. In his new home, this little boy was, from the beginning, 'beaten every single day', thrashed for not doing things the right way - 'but I had never been shown the right way'. The father in the family was a 'chronic alcoholic' and the worst beatings were inflicted on this child when his father had been drinking on a Friday night. The family had a farm and from a young age, the child was made work 'very hard'. For a period he had 'no shoes, and 'I would have to walk for hours to get to school'.

This regime lasted until he was 12 years old - when he was moved to a second 'boarding out' family. But he was similarly beaten there and ended up running away. Then his luck seemed to change when, while 'on the road', he was picked up by a man, a member of a film crew, who paid for his first night in a hotel and gave him the fare to get to London (via the ferry). He was free of the day-to-day horrors of boarding out, but the long-term effects of the constant beatings and the other aspects of his life up to that time, proved to be profound; he became an alcoholic, and although he did marry twice, both wives left him because of the drinking and he has little contact with his children. He has now been sober for 10 years, he told the Committee, and has worked as a labourer and in the security industry, but overall, he said, he has led 'a very nomadic life', even moving from the UK to the USA 'on a whim'. This man never

managed to meet his birthmother but the saddest sentence in his narrative was: 'I miss her every day'.

Stories of serious physical abuse by foster families resulted not just in psychological scarring but in life-altering physical injuries and they continued with this next account from the witness who was fostered, also at five years old. His new "parents" were three unmarried siblings who lived on a farm and who 'severely' beat him and, he told the Committee, threw him down the stairs. This series of assaults resulted in a 'fused' ankle which has left him with a bad limp, a frozen shoulder, and arms that cannot properly bear weight.

When the severity of the abuse was discovered, he was moved to another foster home where he was 'very well taken care of', too late. While looking for work after his second foster mother died when he was 18 years old, he found it difficult to find any as he was now seen as 'a cripple' with employers telling him: 'You'll be no good to us'. He is angry with the state for not protecting him from the abuse he suffered. He is also upset about the fact that 'the circumstances of my birth came up throughout my life - having to tell people I was illegitimate has been very hurtful'.

The spectre of land inheritance rose for a time in the case of this next witness, who had been fostered with an elderly couple with no children of their own, and whose farm was let to their nephew, who resented the witness, fearing that he would 'get in the way' of inheriting the place. Although life was not easy, he did manage to get on very well at school and 'was never singled out for being a foster child'.

Some years later, however, he was moved into another farming family where there were fleas in the room where he slept, and 'mice crawling along the roof; there was no heating or running water and he had to drink from a stream and use the fields as a toilet. Sometimes the food he was given was infested with maggots. He couldn't study properly, because there was no electricity, his books were 'filthy with soot' and his school work deteriorated significantly.

This witness never received a penny for his 'labours' on this farm. He is emotionally scarred as he feels he has never 'belonged'. He also feels the loss of 'proper education' and it makes him angry. In addition, he told the Committee, that he believes that it is because he had to drink dirty water that he now suffers from hepatitis B.

This next witness said that he remained in the home until he was six and a half years old, and was fostered out to a couple who could not have children of their own and wanted 'someone to take over the farm'. They had responded to an ad in a local newspaper seeking foster parents 'and when they came to the home, I smiled at my foster mother and she knew she wanted me'. When first he arrived at his new home, however, he was 'frightened' by it, never having seen a dog before, or farm animals (even pictures of them) but cheered up and from then on he had a 'happy upbringing' and enjoyed 'the freedom of being outside on the farm. 'I was born a second time'.

His difficulties arose, not on the farm, but everywhere else; when still at school, although some of the teachers were 'very supportive', he said, he was 'not allowed to mix with other children in the playground and had to take his lunchtime at a time different from that of other children. Later, at work, he experienced 'verbal abuse' and 'being called a bastard'. The discrimination spread later to dancehalls, where, because of his family status being well known (and obviously well-discussed) in the area, he 'would struggle to meet girls'.

He did marry and have his own children, but always worried how they might be affected by his past as to this day, he still gets 'a certain number of digs'. Unfortunately, throughout, his birthmother refused to sign adoption papers, so while his parents had wanted to adopt him - his foster mother praying ceaselessly to Padre Pio for both him and his birthmother - the witness himself was conflicted about the situation. On the one hand, he would have liked her to sign the papers because 'it would have made his life easier', not least because he 'would have inherited more land'.

On the other, it did make him aware that his birthmother 'wanted him' and he intuited her fear that he 'wouldn't look for her if she had signed'. His foster parents were very supportive of his quest to find her, accompanying him to the UK when he eventually tracked her down and went to meet her. Just in time, because she died not long afterwards. He has erected a headstone in her memory where she lived.

Another foster child's farm placement was also a source of gossip in the parish. It also involved land. The farming couple were elderly and before leaving for school, the witness had chores to do, milking and feeding the cows, (seasonal) sowing of potatoes and cabbages, filling barrels with water for cement. While his foster mother tried to

have him adopted, his foster father refused as he wanted his nephew to inherit the land.

However, the witness went to work for his foster mother's brother, and while he received no payment for his work there, that man left him his farm in 1972. His foster mother bought him a car to enable travel between both tracts of land. So all in all, unlike others who had suffered by being placed with farm families, things worked out for this witness, although he said 'stigma, complete with ugly comments' still applied, and not just to him. One day he overheard a neighbour chatting to his parents and then, casually, mid-chat: 'Sure you're only raising a bastard!'

This next man came to the Confidential Committee 'because I wanted to get it off my mind'. He spent two years in the home and then was sent to another, then juggled into and out of 'different foster homes, in one of which he was forced to 'sleep where the pigs slept because I was wetting the bed'. 'There was no light', he went on, telling the Confidential Committee that on one occasion while in the pigsty, 'a rusty nail went through my forehead'. The foster parents he said merely 'washed the wound and put a plaster on it'. No mention of a doctor. Nor did he ever see a doctor in his next port of call, an industrial school to which he was sent at the age of 11 years, by a judge. 'The teachers were fine, some of the staff were great, but some would hit you for no reason and some would call me 'an imbecile'. I wasn't an imbecile, I was depressed. I had a pain in my mind. I think that's worse than any pain, I felt like a lesser boy. It's lonely growing up without a family'.

He met his mother once, when he was still five years old. 'She brought me to her parents and they didn't say a word'. He never saw her - or them - after that. As an adult, having worked part-time for 30 years, he continues to suffer from depression, anxiety - and to add to his difficulties now, agoraphobia.

A positive fostering experience was described by the next witness to the Committee. The mother of the witness, having remained in the home with him for a year, then emigrated to the US. He was fostered out to a farming couple in their late fifties and always knew his true position, but said he had a 'happy upbringing' and that they regarded him as 'their son' and for company, he also had a foster brother.

This witness believes, he said, that in later life, his 'heavy' involvement with the local GAA, both as a player and an administrator, helped him within the community in that

he was 'accepted'. He believed that 'the media' was 'forgetting about the good that was done' and that 'the nuns were being criticised unjustly'. This man said that he had no sense of being let down. He believes he had lived in 'the Ireland of the times' and that being fostered had never impacted on his life. He did help his foster parents on the farm but never considered they were 'taking advantage' of him, never felt stigmatised and has always been very open about his origins and the fostering. 'I wouldn't swap it'.

A man who was born in a home in 1952 was brought into a room 'to be tested' when he was seven years old. Two weeks later he was put into the back of an ambulance 'and taken to a special school' for children with learning disabilities. The witness was then 'boarded out' from this school with a family to serve as 'companion and minder' for their intellectually disabled son - his bed during this posting was 'two kitchen chairs' put together. At 12 years of age, he moved to another home, and at the age of 13 years, he was taken out and given the job of cleaning 'a disused hospital, wherein he was 'handling dirty used medical equipment with no gloves or protection. He would start work at 5.00 am and go on to school at 8.30 am. Then, he would work every evening. He had to give his money to 'the priests'. Every summer he was sent to work for a farmer where there were no toilets or running water.

This witness told the Committee he 'was beaten in every placement he was in'. Insulted too - in one, for instance on asking for help in preparing his 'family tree', the response was: 'That's easy, your mother was a whore and you're a bastard'. 'To this day, this man said, 'I suffer the effects, often waking at night, screaming and shouting'.

A witness with a disability came to the Confidential Committee to say that 'he doesn't know what it is like to be treated well', 'you are nothing because you come from one of the homes'; explaining that all his life he was mimicked by others for being disabled for instance, being called 'Christy Brown'.

Another witness told the Committee that his cousins would mock him, saying 'you're not entitled to anything, you're adopted, you should be grateful someone took you in'.

A man who was boarded out in 1953 wrote to the Commission about his experiences of being boarded out, including the day he left the mother and baby home. (His experiences in the mother and baby home is recounted in the section on the conditions in the home)

I was put into an ambulance - nobody said anything to me about what was happening. I am a farmer - I was loaded like a beast and brought off. I cried a lot and was especially distressed at leaving my pal, whom I depended on totally. I looked out the window of the ambulance for the whole journey and I remember arriving at a long road with two big piers and a big gate with spikes. I thought I was going to another prison.

(The person we are calling Missus) met me at the gate - I didn't know who she was and she took me in. She was a nice woman. I had a room but (Mister) was an alcoholic who went to the pub every day.

The day after I arrived he had me out working in the fields and that was most of my life from then on. I was only allowed to go to school on days when it was impossible to work on the farm, he would leave out the work I had to do every morning before he went to the pub and he would come home drunk. He was always cross and giving out, even if I had done the work. He would lash out if I was near him and Missus would try to intervene to save me.

I often worked through the night so that the work would get done and I would not be punished - I would get no sleep at all. I often got soaked but had to keep working without getting to change into dry clothes or footwear.

The few times I was allowed to go to school I was not able to keep up or I would not have my homework done so the Master would've put me outside the door as punishment. The children would come at me and ask me why I had [his name] but was living in a home with a (different name) but I couldn't answer because I did not know why.

When the teachers were gone home, some lads would attack me and even though I tried to fight them, I often went home with a black eye. Missus would complain to the school but they only beat me worse afterwards. They would follow me and force me to fight again so, as result I would be late home from school and would be abused for this by Mister. Even when I was playing hurling I was singled out to get belts more than the other children. I was never protected from this by the trainers.

I continued to wet the bed for nearly ten years after I went to Mister and Missus's. Missus never gave out to me as she knew it was because of the abuse I suffered in the

mother and baby home. She would often ask me in the morning who I was talking about when she heard my nightmares.

I was well into my twenties before Missus explained my background to me. I got my birth certificate then and eventually met my mother. I was shy all my life and never had any close friends. I never married and always stayed on my own.

The Adoption experience

Legal adoption is the process by which a parent/child relationship is established between persons unrelated by birth whereby the child and the adoptive parents assume the same rights and duties as children and parents in 'birth families' and the birth mother relinquishes her rights over the child. Adoption in Ireland was introduced by the *Adoption Act 1952* which came into effect on 1 January 1953. It quickly became the most likely outcome for 'illegitimate' children and the most significant exit pathway for children in the institutions being investigated by the Commission. The vast majority of foreign adoptions took place in the period 1945-1969.

Adopted to the United States

Some of the babies adopted from homes were sent to the United States and had happy childhoods with caring families. However, the 'adoption experiences' of these following witnesses have varied tales to tell. They range from the mid-1940s until the 1960s.

This first adoptee categorised her childhood as 'extremely unhappy', was sent to the USA with a boy from the home in which both were born, 'he was to become my adoptive brother'. She told the Committee, their adoptive father 'never wanted her and made his feelings about that known'.

There was a third adoptee in the household, an older girl who had been adopted from within the States before the other two arrived and she, the witness said, was 'favoured', while their father always referred to the witness as 'homely' and 'stupid', and her mother had always introduced her to others as 'my adopted daughter' which made her feel 'different from other children'. Her parents, she said, never told her that they loved her.

When she was in her early teens, her adopted brother 'attempted to molest me', she said, adding that 'this sexual assault was the biggest thing that happened to me'. She thought he was going to kill her, she said, and thinks that this was the cause of her

being 'afraid of boys' for most of her life, that all through school, she wanted to be 'invisible' and that at the age of 14, she 'began to have suicidal thoughts'. In addition, she said she 'could not bear to be around people' and so a series of retail jobs couldn't work out for her and she left each of them in very short order. Her adoptive grandparents were the only ones 'who ever showed me love' and when they died, she spiralled further downhill, abusing alcohol and prescription medicine, suffering acute attacks of psychosis, and being treated with electric shock treatment.

She now suffers from agoraphobia and wishes she could come to Ireland 'but how can I when I can't go out the front door?' She did marry in the US, she told the Committee, and had two sons, one of whom, tragically, died only in recent years. The other, who is divorced, now lives with her to help her cope with her agoraphobia along with the 'health issues' of her husband. This woman 'doesn't remember ever being happy' amending that a little: 'Perhaps when I married and had my children? But I'm not sure even then'. She concluded her evidence with this: 'I wish I was not taken away from my country. I wish I could be in Ireland. I wish my mother could have kept me and raised me in a loving family', adding: 'I love my Irish heritage'. She celebrates this, she said, 'every Saint Patrick's Day'.

The second adoptee-witness had remained in the mother and baby home for five years in the mid-1940s before being adopted to the United States and although there was a huge difference between the tone of his interview and that of the woman above, his had its own poignancies.

His adoptive parents, he said, had paid 'between £750 and £1000 to adopt him', and his adoptive father had used his 'connections' with the American Embassy in Ireland to assist with the visa application. The witness was then brought to Dublin to obtain that and to have a medical check. Then, along with a nun, he was driven to Belfast airport 'because', he said, 'there would be fewer questions asked' in that 'getting illegitimate children out of Ireland was difficult at the time'.

This man's adoptive family was 'Irish Catholic', lived in California and already had a natural son who was older than the witness. On arrival in the United States, the witness had his tonsils extracted, was circumcised, had warts removed - and was enrolled in a Catholic school.

As a sidebar to this story the man told the Committee that the nun, who had accompanied him to Belfast, 'held his hand all the way' because he was 'scared of being on a plane for the first time'. His fear was 'that the toilet would suck him down'. The conclusion of his evidence to the Committee was: 'I was never without want', he said, adding: 'from a materialistic point of view'.

The experience of this third witness is that she never felt that 'being adopted was a bad thing: it was sort of cool being adopted in another country!' She was giving evidence, she said, primarily to ensure that what had happened to her birthmother around the issue of her adoption 'was never going to happen again to other women and children. 'My mother was put out on the street with a broken heart, left to pick up her life. She never recovered'. She said: 'My parents told me they had sent the nuns a lot of money. There is no piece of paper saying that my mother relinquished her rights. I definitely believe that I was sold'.

A witness was adopted from a home to the USA in 1961 (having been born in 1958) and spoke in great detail to the Committee about the extreme abuse he suffered at the hands of both his adoptive father and a close family relative for many years. His adoptive father physically abused him and he was sexually abused by the family relative. This relative, he said, was instrumental in organising his adoption and he exerted huge influence and control on all aspects of the witness's early life. The witness's experience is now the subject of litigation.

1940s / 1950s

A witness who was born in a home in the 1940s was adopted to the USA. She had been told that her birthmother had died in childbirth, but she had discovered that this had been a lie and when her own child was born, curiosity to trace her birthmother was born too, so she came to Ireland to search. Having arrived in Ireland she met two nuns from the home where she had been born; one read 'snippets' from a file 'but refused to hand them over' and she felt she was being treated as though she was 10 years old.

With the help of a genealogy website, she found a match with someone who proved to be her cousin and in this way, also found her mother. She went back to the USA and wrote from there, received no reply, and came back again to Ireland where she left 'notes' at her mother's house - but her birthmother telephoned her at her hotel, asking her to stop contact as her husband and children didn't know of her existence. However, the witness did persist and they did eventually meet, her mother taking her out to dinner and giving her a birthday present. In 2016, the witness brought her own husband and children to Ireland to meet her birthmother and this 'was very positive'.

Nothing is simple in this world, however, and the witness told the Committee that her adoptive mother is resentful about this reunion.

Another witness, adopted into a family in the USA, and treated 'well' by her adoptive family, nevertheless faced constant jibes from classmates that 'her mother had died because she was bad'. When she told her adoptive mother about this, it was explained to her that she had been adopted by her new family because her mother had died in childbirth. She feels, she told the Confidential Committee, that this information had been couched in a way to prevent further questions and expressed concern that her parents had received no counselling or advice as to 'how to handle an adoption'. In consequence of the way she had been told, however well-intentioned this had been, 'every scrap of confidence I had, went'.

Later, because of 'anxiety and nervousness', she dropped out of college, and by the time she gave her evidence to the Committee, she had been treated for depression and self-harming and had spent time in a psychiatric hospital where she had been placed on heavy medication. It was only when she was in her mid-twenties when she discovered that her birth mother was not dead.

Years later she set about trying to find this mother. 'Anything I found out has been in spite of the system' she told the Committee, saying that in 1993, she had sought information from a nun and, she says, was given 'false' information that her mother had been from the (wrong) county: 'She was as cold as ice, it made me feel ten times worse, it was her whole demeanour - I was the offspring of a fallen woman'. But with the help of her husband, she narrowed down the search, coming up with nine women of the same name and with the approval of a dedicated agency, wrote a letter to each of the nine in turn until, one day, her mobile phone rang when she was in a grocery store carpark.

Her birthmother, she said, 'was nervous, blunt and direct' during that phone call telling the witness, 'I didn't bond with you, I moved on'. The witness's shock at having made contact after such a long search, she told the Committee, was such that she 'stayed in bed for two days'. She now phones her mother every month 'and the relationship is improving' but she had to 'build up' that trust: 'Her DNA is running through me and my children but we don't know each other.'

One witness had been slated for adoption to America but her birthmother had refused to sign adoption papers. Later, the witness's mother said to her daughter that she regretted not signing the adoption papers, because the witness 'may have had a better life' if she had, 'times' being hard at home and the witness's stepfather being 'fond of the drink'. This witness said, however, that while she always knew, growing up, that she was different and 'felt that stigma', and while she did have her ups and downs 'I had my Mammy'.

'Things were very good' for a woman who was adopted into her family in 1957 until her adoptive mother died when she was 11 years old. After the death of her adoptive mother, she saw her adoptive father abusing his niece - while also discovering that he had been in prison because of 'inappropriate issues with young men' while in the army.

In the garden shed where he ran 'workshops' for young boys, she saw him abusing them too. Obviously having realised that she knew what was going on, he threatened her that she would be 'taken away' if she ever spoke of these things. She told the Committee, that when she was 15 or 16 years old, men who 'worked with her father', began calling to the house with the message: 'Your daddy sent me to see you'. Her additional issue with this man, her adoptive father, was that he had told her that her birth mother had died in childbirth, but that was a lie. The witness has since traced her birth mother.

When a witness was two months old in 1955, she was adopted into a family with two natural children. Being mixed race, with her new family being 'fair and pale-skinned', she always 'felt different', especially as she and her family faced 'open racism' in their neighbourhood, with neighbours coming to the house, asking her mother 'why she had brought a black child home?' and arguing that 'she should be taken back to the orphanage'. After a while, her parents were unable to take the sustained pressure and did take her back, but after a couple of days, came and took her home again.

Disputes with the neighbours continued, however, with her adoptive mother constantly 'getting into fights' about her. She told the Committee that her family had been given 'absolutely no guidance or support' as to how to deal with this situation and fully acknowledged that despite all these difficulties and pressures, they did their best for her and gave her a 'good upbringing'. However, she said, she 'still feels like an alien'.

This witness, born in 1959 in a home, found out she was adopted at the age of 'seven or eight' and 'thought it was a disease'. She finally met her birthmother in 1992, to find that she had always been unwell, was suffering from depression and has always had difficulty acknowledging the witness: 'You'd love to hug her and hit her at the same time'.

Then there was the witness, who in the mid-1950s had a 'very difficult childhood' with a 'very strict adoptive mother' who would not let her associate with any other children and who beat her. Her adoptive father was blind. When the witness met her birthmother in later life, her birthmother told her that her birthfather had been a priest who had raped her. The two lost contact 'for a while' and during that period, a half-brother contacted the witness, with the news of who he was, and not only that, but that he had a twin - both born of the witness's birthmother. The birthmother had told the witness that she was the only child. When the witness confronted her about this falsehood, the birthmother said she had thought the twins 'were dead'.

This next witness, adopted six months after she was born in a home in the mid-Fifties, does not believe that any vetting of her adoptive parents or their home was done to ensure that they were suitable to adopt herself and the other five children who were in the house. Her adoptive mother, she said, was a witch'. She was critical about the 'lack of accountability' of adoption agencies and adoption placements and when she arrived at her new home, there was no space for her and she had to sleep in a drawer. When this witness was 17 years old, she married the first person who told her he loved her. 'It was a terrible marriage'.

The 'morass of lies and deceit is very unsettling,' another witness told the Committee. She said that her adoptive parents were given 'incorrect information' about her; although they knew about her background, 'they were lied to, to stem further investigation'. On the other hand, this witness's situation was complex: she believes,

she said, that had her birthmother (a widow with 10 children) kept her, she, the witness, 'would have had a very difficult life'.

While her own children 'struggle' to understand how their grandmother could have given up her baby, the witness regards herself as being 'one of the lucky ones' in that she *had* a mother (in her adoptive mother) while her sister, also adopted, did not.

For many years, this birthmother had not revealed the existence of these two adopted children to the 10 of her 'natural' brood, but eventually, contact was made and all 12 of the birthchildren met together, which 'went very well, except for one sibling'. While she now has an ongoing relationship with her birthmother, her adopted sister, the witness told the Committee, had been looking for a 'mother figure' but 'they just didn't gel'.

When she was seven months old, this next witness said, her birthmother's father (her widowed grandfather) adopted her, being permitted to do so only after a 'hard fight' with the authorities. With him she had, she said, 'an excellent life' and while growing up, referred to him as 'Dad'. He died, however, when she was 12 years old and she then moved to a life less happy with her mother and stepfather, the latter, she said, being 'very abusive' towards her mother and 'hating' her. She felt 'totally lost' while her mother had gone on to have a further 11 children with this man. This witness left school, in effect, after her Inter Cert, attending for only one day a week after that. She got a job in a textile firm and worked there for 26 years.

1960s

At the beginning of the 1960s, a woman at two years of age was adopted by a farming couple into a 'beautiful home'. Things were not straightforward for these parents, however, because the neighbours would make 'cruel' comments about their new arrival. 'They didn't know how to handle this and received no support for their situation'.

At school, the witness was sad and lonely, even suicidal, because she felt different from her peers - who would tease her. She also suffered from 'rage' towards her adoptive mother, blaming her for 'taking me away from my birthmother'. This witness

started drinking at the age of 12, and 'trying to fill the hole', became an alcoholic. 'Wanting to be loved', she also, in her own words, 'was promiscuous and was taken advantage of a lot'.

She married 'an abusive man' at the age of 17, but ran away from him and the marriage after having her third child. She has had therapy and counselling for her problems and has been sober for more than 20 years now, but continues to ask: 'What's wrong with me? 'I think I died the day I left my mother'.

A witness 'felt compelled' to come to the Confidential Committee to 'break down the wall of secrecy'. He was adopted when he was three years of age and explained that even as a child, he suffered 'feelings of loss, low self-esteem and abandonment, huge lows, feelings of annihilation, and anxiety' - and confessed that as an adult, even going for a job interview hadn't caused the level of anxiety he felt coming to the Commission to speak about his childhood.

He put all this sadness and negative feelings down to 'the lack of nurturing at the start'. He also told the Committee that he broke down in tears when he went back to visit the home in which he was born and saw all the little headstones. 'I kept thinking they're dead and I'm not'.

A witness born in the late 1960's said she discovered she was adopted on the day she was with her mother and brother at a school and overheard a nun asking incredulously: 'So what you're telling me is they're not really brother and sister?'

This is a story about a girl and her brother who were adopted into a family, involved in a schismatic Catholic group with headquarters in another country but with premises in Ireland. 'They seemed to have adopted me', the witness said, 'to purify me from the perspective of their religious ethos'. 'I was bad blood, and I wasn't to be like my mother'. This 'purification' could be classed as torture and makes for difficult reading as the witness was subjected to severe physical beatings, was starved and then intermittently force-fed: 'If I vomited I was made eat the vomit. I remember my brother being made eat poo because we were hungry'.

She was tied up, put under the stairs, made 'kneel on the stairs for a long time seeking forgiveness' - and her head was scalded 'with water from a hot kettle'. Although her

brother was hospitalised 'because of abuse' and she had been hospitalised for 'a head injury' (but not from that scalding, 'I had all blisters. I have scars on my hands from defending my face. All the abuse was carried out by my mother'.) She remembers 'eating the pages of books because of anxiety', she told the Committee, and this was followed by her mouth being 'washed out with soap'.

Adding to all this, she was sexually abused by her adoptive grandfather - when she was 'three, four and five years old: 'I remember the feathered quilt and the smell in the room. I remember pain. I remember not wanting to go up there'. This man, she said, also abused his own daughters 'and other cousins. My understanding was that we were sent up to him by aunts'.

It is extraordinary, certainly by present day standards, to understand that by this witness's account, since 'social workers were involved' with this family, why she and her brother were not rescued and taken away by them. 'The government or somebody should have checked if we were alright', this witness said to the Confidential Committee. This witness attempted suicide when she was 13 or 14 years old - and then, as she grew older, in an attempt to avoid the abuse: 'I ran away several times. I often slept out in the open, in sheds or behind buildings. When I was 15 or 16 years old, I left one night and never went back'.

The next witness raised the socio-economics of child placements. She was adopted at three months old into 'an educated professional family'. She questions the motive for transferring children between socio-economic groups and 'whether there were agendas' operating here. Speaking of herself, she told the Committee that her life has been 'profoundly affected' by 'her background and start in life' and 'all the unanswered questions and uncertainty' she had to deal with during her early experience.

She has 'very strong views' on the obstacles faced by adoptees in attempting to access their own records, emphasising 'the seriousness of not knowing one's own story' and of 'being treated like a commodity and as different to other people'. She also has a singular perspective on adoption itself: 'splitting your identity in two, life before adoption and life after, is entirely deceptive and undermines your sense of self. The very idea that you became something better after your adoption is offensive to your birth family'.

Unfortunately, in 1965, the mother of a witness died shortly after giving birth to her in a mother and baby home, having haemorrhaged. The witness was adopted at the age of three months, but didn't know this until she was 11 years old, like other witnesses who came to the Committee. She discovered this 'through talk at school'. She then created a fantasy about her birthmother - that she had been a 'princess'.

Her adoptive mother, she told the Committee was far from the vision of mothers she had created in her head, 'people thought she was my grandmother' and this witness felt very isolated as she had no siblings, cousins or friends, although she loved her adoptive father: 'he was a wonderful man', it is her mother who was 'the disciplinarian'. Nevertheless she does believe she was 'given a good life' and was 'well provided for'. When she had her own children, the effect on her was 'profound' they 'being the first (living) blood relatives I had'.

A small number of witnesses of colour came to the Committee. All spoke of their difficulties while growing up within what was until recently a monocultural population.

This witness was adopted at nine months old. The other daughter in her family would refer to her, using the N-word, she was 'stared at constantly and always felt nobody liked her. She couldn't wait to get away - and did - to the UK, at 17 years of age, where she went to college. She then went on to the USA where she still lives.

But this witness feels rootless: 'I always wanted to be somewhere else, lied about my identity my whole life and still do. I've never been able to say I'm Irish - I don't believe I'm from there'.

Another witness of mixed race said she was adopted from a home at eight months old, to a couple who were 'extremely old, poor, and struggled to put food on the table. The house was in 'poor condition, with water running down the walls'. Her adoptive mother was ill and would regularly spend time in hospital - and in any event, the witness 'did not get on' with her. She believes that she was adopted into such 'an unsuitable' family because 'it was presumed that nobody else would want me'.

This next woman's adoptive parents were, she told the Committee, 'substantially' wealthy, but the mother was 'emotionally' and 'sometimes physically' abusive. She regards the situation into which she was placed to have been 'a nightmare scenario' and cannot understand how anyone could give a child to someone like that - 'you'd have to be psychologically assessed now. I feel I was sold like a piece of meat' or 'bought in a supermarket,' especially when her mother would make comments such as: 'You weren't worth it!

Another witnesses told the Commission about her 'wonderful' adoption. Born in a home in the early 1960s, she became the only child of a couple in their late 30s. She was sent to a private school, given dance and piano lessons and 'could not speak more highly' of her adoptive parents.

She had 'one concern'. She had, she said, spent her 'summer months' in the town of which both her natural mother and adoptive parents were natives. Her concern was, she told the Committee that 'I could have ended up marrying my own brother!'

1970s

Social workers featured in a lot accounts from witnesses, some by their absence or lack of action when, according to disillusioned witnesses, action was warranted.

This next story pertains to the 1970s and the witness who came to the Committee saying that her adoptive parents split up when she was two or three years old. Years later, she discovered that her adoptive father had been in a relationship with the social worker who had arranged her adoption and they continued to be together for years after he left her adoptive mother, before marrying another woman. She believes that this affair may have started before she was adopted, and feels that her adoption had been a (vain) attempt to shore up the marriage of her parents. This witness is 'very angry' that in her professional capacity, this social worker put her into a family where she had to know personally how 'unstable' it was.

About adoption itself, the witness told the Committee (echoing what other adoptees expressed in essence) that 'you belong to two families but you don't belong'. She added, 'it's only now I'm able to say: 'I'm adopted' without my face going blood red'.

The group of professionals who had come to speak to the Committee about the 'culture of adoption' in mother and baby homes (see section on adoption and consent) did not confine themselves to that topic but went on to discuss the somewhat depressing situation pertaining to children who were not adopted - and who would never find homes for all kinds of reasons.

They explained to the Committee that as part of a 'community social work team' in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in the home they selected for study, there were three separate nurseries, one for new-borns, one for children aged three to six months, and the nursery in the 'special care building' where the toddlers were kept. There was also a special room for older toddlers who were considered to have some form of birth defect. They were kept in cots, in their pyjamas, and fed pureed food, despite their ages. (One witness reported to the Committee that she had been in the vicinity of that room on one occasion and had been struck by 'how quiet' it had been.)

There was a belief that adopters wanted only perfect children and this group was told in the course of their study, that what was wanted was 'a child of good progeny' and that a psychiatrist would come to the special care building 'to do a report' if there was 'a history' in the child's family: a 'report had to be done for the adoptive family before the child could leave'. These workers told the Committee that children were 'held up' for a long time for unnecessary reasons, one witness describing it as an 'archaic practice' and an 'unhealthy caring situation, cocooning them in institutions'.

Other observations by these witnesses included:

- one boy with an intellectual disability had his situation 'worsened' by the way he was treated in the home.
- The adoption agency would consider 'the smallest thing' as making children unfit for adoption, something like a cough or a chest infection. They said they had also noted that the adoption agency doctor would extend their times for 'absurd' reasons.
- If they, these workers in social care, did not intervene to have a child adopted, they didn't know, they said, 'where the children would have ended up - but were 'met with resistance' when they did try to intervene.

Those children of whom they spoke, many of them languishing in that 'quiet room' in the mother and baby home, were those who probably never made it through to be able to come to the Committee to tell of their fostering or adoption experience.

This next witness said: 'I've no horror stories, thankfully!' He had been born, later again than the previous witnesses, in a home and had been adopted at seven months old. He had always known he was an adoptee but apart from experiencing 'a small level of detachment', he told the Committee, he was fine with his new situation, although, 'if you are not with your original family, being adopted affects you to some degree'.

His parents told him in later life, that as an infant when he arrived at his new home, he had a habit of banging his head against his cot, leading them to believe that this had arisen from him having been left alone in the mother and baby home cots (he had been born in one and transferred to another) too long by himself. Overall, though, this witness testified that he had enjoyed a 'good upbringing in a happy home'.

When growing up in the USA, into which he had been adopted by a 'Catholic family', a young boy fantasised greatly about his birthmother, creating wonderful images in his mind of who she might have been.

However, he was completely disillusioned when he discovered a letter from her to his adoptive parents demanding 'more money' in exchange for her consent to adopt. Even sadder was that up to then he had been under the impression that he was an orphan. From then on, the witness, said, he felt like he had been 'sold for silver'.

In later life, this witness started to search for his mother, going so far as to appear on a radio station, local to what he believed was her home place. In doing so, he upset the status quo in the locality, with some people professing disquiet about him 'going public' with his search, leading him to conclude that 'there was still a stigma'. Then in going through the files and archives of County Council records and those of Social Services offices, he found himself described

as 'illegitimate' and an 'inmate'. His mother had died before he found her.

Finally, ending this section with two positive experiences of adoption brought to the Confidential Committee.

In the 1970s, this first witness was adopted by a family where there were five natural siblings. She said she had a 'very happy' upbringing and was made aware at an early age that she was adopted. She believes, she told the Committee, that in her home, the fact that she was one of the middle children in terms of age helped to make her feel 'wanted'.

This second woman, born in a home in the mid-1980s, said she had had an 'excellent' experience with a family who fostered her after the three years she had spent in the home, and later adopted her when she was 17 years old. Her birth parents, she told the Committee, were mixed race, from Ireland and Africa. When she was young, she had health issues and she believes that this explains her parents' delay in changing her status in their home from 'fostered' to 'adopted' as they wanted to keep her in the health care system for as long as possible. 'They always explained about my colour', she said. 'I didn't really have any bad experiences, just the odd comment'.

There was a natural daughter in the family, and the witness became close to her - as she was to her adoptive parents. She has some information about her birthparents but has never traced them: 'My mum and dad always said they were happy to help if I ever wanted to and I put my name on the Adopted Person's Register, but I've heard nothing. You hear a lot of bad stories so I'm cautious about tracing my mother. I am also curious. I don't think you can totally prepare for it' (meeting birth parents). She now has her own apartment and lives close to her adoptive parents and her sister.

Exit and Aftermath

'Part of me died the day my son was taken. I became a sad, empty shell of a girl'.

'It was the end of my prison sentence when my Mum took me home'.

1950s

This witness was 13 years old when she was removed from her foster family. Her experiences of boarding out are described earlier in the report.

She was 13 years old when her stepfather, married to her 'real' mother in the UK, brought her over there, for the sole purpose, she believes, of abusing her. She became pregnant twice. With the first, she had an abortion, her second child was adopted. (Her birth mother had a further five children with her stepfather and the witness believes she 'knew what was happening' to her but 'did nothing'.)

She spent time in a remand home because, she said, she was regarded as 'a bad girl'. She told the Committee that her social worker had said to her that 'if you were a nicer girl I would have got you a job in Marks and Spencer'. This social worker, she said, 'never asked her who was abusing her'.

She had a second abortion when she was 17 years old - and then she got married so she could get away from her stepfather. That marriage was short-lived. The witness married again and had two children, but this husband was 'extremely violent' and she was scared of him. He died at the age of 44. She said that the two children she had with him knew nothing of her early life, for instance about the baby she had put up for adoption, who would have been their half-sibling. Then she met and married a 'lovely man'. He died of cancer.

'It's lovely to talk to you', she said to the Confidential Committee before leaving the Commission's premises, 'because you bury it'.

A woman who had been adopted to the USA came to the Confidential Committee to speak of her search for her roots in Ireland. She was born in a home in 1957, and was adopted to the USA when she was three years of age. She later discovered that after she was born her birth mother went to the USA and was working as a nurse there when 'she met another man', and became pregnant for the second time. She went into labour one night when she was alone and had no phone and no-one to call for help and sadly, that baby died soon after birth. The witness's mother then developed pneumonia and a short time later, died tragically.

The witness came to Ireland in 1983 to research her history, not knowing that her birthmother was dead. However, her research did bear fruit in the late 1990s when she managed to connect with newly discovered Irish relations, her birthmother's family; they gave her the information she had wanted, and she is now 'on good terms' with this new family. This witness also discovered during her search that she was a twin - her twin brother having died at birth in the home.

In 1959, a 15 year old became pregnant following a sexual assault by a friend of her father's. The parents of the witness adopted their granddaughter and brought her up as the witness's sister, a ruse families frequently employed to head off stigma and parish condemnation. It required adherence to utter secrecy by the parties who knew the full story, including the birthmother. This witness had 'a nervous breakdown' when she came back home after giving birth.

Another witness who had also given birth in 1959, when she was 21 years old, did not wish to give her baby up for adoption. She agreed with the nuns that she would temporarily place her daughter in foster care until she could marry the birthfather when their child could then be classified as 'legitimate'. That marriage took place in 1960. When their daughter was returned to her, this man didn't want her and consequently, 'ill-treated' both his wife and the baby, so badly that the witness felt she had to give the child back to the foster carers. Despite this, the witness went on to have six more children with this man before he left her to marry again, thereby 'committing bigamy'. She told the Committee that at the time, she 'would have married *anyone*' to get her child back.

The mother of this next witness had died just before the witness gave birth to her son in a home at the age of 16. She was 'very unwell' after the birth. She was in recovery for six weeks, stayed in the home for four years and spent the next nine years in a

laundry, by this time having become 'so completely institutionalised' that when she left there, she couldn't cope with the nursing home job that had been arranged for her and had to return to this laundry. She spent more time there before finally moving to a city.

Soon afterwards, she married and had seven children with her husband; but, she told the Committee, it is not a 'happy marriage' because her husband is an alcoholic. They remain together 'because you have no choice'. She has since traced and met her first son, to find that he had a 'difficult' upbringing in state care, and suffers from alcoholism and other health problems. However, she said, 'he has become close with his half siblings'.

It was also in the 1950s that a 19-year old, due to be married to her boyfriend, discovered she was pregnant when she went to the family doctor for a check-up. Like so many witnesses around that age (and younger but even into their 20s), she too told the Confidential Committee that she'd had no knowledge of the 'facts of life'.

This doctor called an ambulance right away, which took her to a mother and baby home - her parents were unaware of this and she herself believed she was being taken to hospital. When her fiancé tried to visit her he was not allowed on the premises; it was customary in that home, she said, that 'when workmen came to the home, the women were locked away'.

The nuns she said, pressured her to have her baby adopted but this woman's parents stepped up and 'fought to get me out of the home' so she could keep her baby and go home. She told the Committee she 'doesn't know how they did it'. Despite everything ending well from her perspective, the witness said the home had left 'an imprint' on her, and that the whole experience had been 'very distressing'. She did marry the birthfather and went on to have a further 11 children with him.

A witness, who gave birth to a daughter in 1956, left her child in the home 'while she got herself set up to look after her in the outside world' she said. She subsequently had twins, but all three of her children were adopted, without she said, her permission or involvement. (This happened before she met and married her husband. She told him she'd had an accident and could not have children with him.)

She and her husband ended up running a very successful business in the UK and in later years, all three of her children have traced her, and reunited with her first daughter with whom she is 'in constant touch'.

This next witness had 'deliberately' stayed on in the home with her daughter after the child was born, long enough so that her daughter would have learned to walk and be toilet trained, and so in the witness's view, would be independent and thereby 'safer' from ill treatment when the witness had to leave her behind in the home. The plan was that the witness would go out to work 'so she could make a plan to keep her'.

She put the plan into action while continuing to visit the child in the home but time moved on, and came the day when she was told by the nuns that they could no longer keep her daughter. The subject of adoption came up again at that point but the witness maintained her stance and refused to contemplate it. She ensured she made enough money to pay the home for her daughter's keep there. She met a man, they married and he went with her to the home to collect her daughter, and then he 'raised her as his own'.

This couple went on to have seven more children, but as the nuns had always warned her that 'the sins of the mother will be passed on', she told the Committee that she had been 'very strict' in rearing that first daughter. As a small addendum, she told the Committee that when she and her fiancé told her father they were getting married, his response to her future husband was: 'You're a better man than me for wanting to marry *her!*'

Another witness had thought she would be leaving the home with her baby, but was simply told: 'You're leaving today' and was immediately sent, without him, to a solicitor's house to be a live-in housemaid. She spent five years there, receiving 'only a few bob here and there' to mind the children and do the housework: 'When I left, I left in the same clothes I arrived in'. She was in such despair about losing her child and her own position in life, she went to the banks of a river and was contemplating throwing herself in, when a man who was fishing nearby saw what was happening and, 'stopped me'. She 'ended up' marrying him, she told the Committee. They had more children, but she had never told him, or them, about her son before, sadly, her husband died.

Her first son traced her and after their first meeting, she opened up about everything to her daughters, and all her children now enjoy a 'great relationship and 'it's all a great relief'. The witness said that when she was attending her own mother's funeral, she felt there was still a stigma: 'The priest passed me by, refusing to shake my hand'.

This next witness had her son in 1955 when she was 15 years old. Her father collected her from the home after her son had been 'taken' for adoption. He brought the witness straight to her sister's house where she was 'hidden away' until they could organise 'what should happen next'. Her (married) sister had just had a baby and being near this child gave the witness, she said to the Committee, 'some comfort' at the time.

Her father then organised a job for her as an 'au pair' for the next year and a half. He then arranged for her to go to the UK to study nursing on a one-way ticket. The memory of that 'secret son' went with her into her nursing training and her subsequent marriage. He was in her thoughts when her two other children were born, through her divorce and remarriage. Then in recent years, he traced her. She had to tell her second husband about him. She had always worried about this husband's reaction should he find out about her first son's existence - but, to her huge relief, he was 'very understanding'.

However, she told the Committee, 'the trauma of leaving home at the age of 15 years and never returning, will never leave me'. She also said that she regrets many things, not least that she kept that secret for so long - especially since her daughter died without knowing that she had a half-brother. Had her son not traced her, she said to the Committee, she would have taken the secret with her 'to the grave'. Having met him, though, it wasn't plain sailing for her - she now felt, she said, 'exposed to the world, my secret was out'. In addition, some of her siblings, never having known of this nephew's existence, had, in her words, 'difficulty processing it'. But a 'strong relationship' between witness and first son was established and continues.

1960s

A witness who gave birth in a home in the 1960s told the Committee that when she and her daughter left the institution, she went to her family home, while the baby went to live with the witness's uncle and his wife. But the baby became very ill and was hospitalised. When she recovered, and was discharged: 'Myself and my mother brought her home on the bus'.

A witness then told the Committee that although she 'lives a Christian life' she cannot go along with the Roman Catholic Church because of her 'experiences' of being in a home in 1964. She had eventually traced her daughter but she found that her child, who had been adopted into the USA, had died at the age of 37. The witness has suffered from 'memory blanks' and puts this down to 'forgetting what you can't handle'.

In 1965 a witness gave birth to a daughter in a home following a 'very traumatic' upbringing during which her mother suffered from psychiatric issues and her father was an alcoholic who abused her. On turning 18 years in 1983, this daughter successfully traced the witness and telephoned her. Her daughter had become pregnant and, with her adoptive parents both dead, she was seeking advice from her birthmother. However, they then had no further contact until 20 years later.

Another witness married and had two more children after her exit from a mother and baby home. However, issues developed with her husband because of her continuing unhappiness about the adoption of her baby son and after 20 years, her marriage ended because her husband could (no longer) support her ongoing efforts 'to challenge the authorities about what had happened to' her, 'a battle', she said, 'that changed and defined my life'. She remained adamant, she told the Confidential Committee, that she had 'signed nothing' and yet her son was taken in 1968. Since then, she said: 'I have spent my life fighting to expose the wrongs that were done'. She also lost all connections with her family. As for her first son, she did trace him but described their relationship as 'acrimonious'.

In 1967, when an 18-year old left the mother and baby home, her boyfriend collected her and drove her straight to the institution where the child had been sent to await adoption. The nuns, however, called the Gardaí and they were not allowed to take their child. The witness's relationship with her mother (who had refused consent to a

marriage with this boyfriend) had broken down so she cut ties there and followed him to the UK, where they did marry and have further children together.

This witness went for counselling after her (estranged) mother died in the early 2000s, but found herself still unable to forgive the lack of family support. She then set about tracing her daughter, with a successful outcome and they corresponded for a year before arranging to meet. However, when that time came, the daughter's birthfather, 'shocked' at this prospect because he had been kept in the dark about the process (he accused the witness of being 'sly' she told the Committee) nevertheless went along to this first encounter with his daughter, but while his wife wanted to shout from the rooftops with joy, he remained, she said, 'very uncomfortable about the situation'. This witness and her daughter, now married with her own children have an 'ongoing close relationship' and this daughter has now met her new siblings and they have met her children.

This next witness gave birth to a son in a home in 1968. Her son was adopted. Having left the home, the witness married 'within a year', and over the next 20 years, gave birth to six more children. She did tell her husband of her mother and baby home experience, revealing the existence of another child, but at the time, did not tell her children or anyone else, as she was 'too ashamed'. This marriage 'broke down' after those 20 years, but when her son turned 21 years, she and a daughter (who by then knew about her half-brother), made enquiries about finding him, but 'got nowhere'. The witness renewed the search having attended a lecture about adoption, and it was at about this time she was told that her son was also searching. Their reunion 'went very well and her son told her that his experience of adoption had been 'very positive'.

Another witness told the Committee she believed that her son's adoption papers had been forged. She married some time later and had five more children never telling them about their half-brother - until a work colleague asked one of them: 'Did your mother ever trace her baby?' 'The burden had been lifted', she said. Her husband was very supportive and the whole family then assisted with the tracing. 'It worked out', she said, 'and they've all since met and have a 'strong relationship'.

Still in the 1960s, an 18-year old gave birth, her baby was adopted, and four years later, she decided to tell everything to the man she was to marry. He was supportive, the marriage went ahead and they had four children. They had

both kept the secret from everyone, including the children they had together.

Her husband died in the 1980s. Years later, just two years before coming to the Confidential Committee, the witness decided that it would have been unfair to keep the secret from her children any longer, and certainly didn't want them to find out after her own death. She wrote each of the four a letter, having to call on all her courage to do so because she feared they would ostracise her. However, that didn't happen and, she said, 'there 'hasn't been much discussion about it since'.

A witness, who had had a 'casual' encounter with a local in the mid-1960s - she was 19 years old, he was of a similar age - became pregnant. She disclosed this to her parents. They 'dropped her off' at the gates of the home, 'no kiss, no goodbye'.

After giving birth, she told her parents she would not return home if she was forced to put her child up for adoption. Like some other parents in similar circumstances, they agreed that they themselves would adopt her daughter, but with a very serious stipulation - this would happen only if the witness signed her over and never, ever disclosed that she had given birth to her. When speaking to the Committee, the witness was upset because, she said, her daughter had only recently discovered the true story of her birth.

Her own story was that after yielding her daughter to her parents, she had gone to the UK and had met and married a man of foreign origin, who, when she revealed her history, 'threw her into a puddle', then 'abandoned' her. However, he returned after six months and they had two children together - but the marriage did break up and the witness went on to have a further two children with a new partner, whom she described as 'a diamond'. 'God will never forgive me for what I've done', this witness said.

This witness, aged 21 years in the early 1960s, had been with her baby son in a mother and baby home for 'approximately a year and a half' when a nun approached her with her son in her arms. 'He's being taken', she said, and was gone. The witness now lives outside Ireland. Her 'natural' daughter has traced her half-sibling. He is living in Ireland, is mentally ill and addicted to alcohol.

Another mother said, 'it was cruel to have had him in the home with you for fifteen months, and then have him taken away'. She realised she had no choice but to give up her son for adoption. Having done so, she was transferred to a laundry directly from the home. 'Just told this was happening and being given a false name. It was a live-in, unpaid job'. Her son, she said, 'could not walk properly because he had been kept in a playpen for too long', and her main memories of the home were: 'Fear of the nuns, the control they had over you, depression, loneliness, sadness'. In later life she traced her son and discovered that his adoptive parents had sent money to the home for many years after he had been given to them. 'You feel your baby was sold and you were there working for nothing'. 'I still get the creeps when I see a nun in uniform'.

It was 1964 when the next witness, 23 years old, gave birth to a son in a home. She was very soon sent 'with her baby and three nuns' to an agency to hand him over for adoption. Immediately after she came home, she met her boyfriend, the birthfather, who apologised to her 'for the way he had acted' and asked her to marry him. She said she would if they could get their baby back - and contacted the priest who had organised the adoption. However, this priest she said, told her that her son was already gone (failing to tell her she had more time to consider her options before she signed the final papers.) She signed her consent.

The pair did marry and had four more children together. However, the husband died and it was then that the witness began the process of tracing her son - discovering that when he was a teenager, he had emigrated, with his adoptive family to Australia. Birthmother and son corresponded via 'letter and phone over a period of five or six years' until, she told the Committee that tragically, her son had died.

When this next witness's husband died, she discovered she had been living in a 'bigamous' marriage. She had had four children with him. As for her own backstory, her mother had died when she was just 16 years old, her father, who had died more than 20 years before she came to the Committee, had abused her sexually and had been 'brutally violent'. When her father found out she was pregnant, he gave her what she termed 'the hiding of her life' and forbade her to be seen outside before going on to sign adoption papers on her behalf. She has since traced the son she had had in a mother and baby home but as things stood when she was speaking to the Committee, he had not wished to meet her.

A witness came to give evidence to the Confidential Committee detailing her 'very traumatic upbringing', including sexual abuse by her father. With her siblings, she had been taken into state care for a period. She gave birth to her baby, a daughter, who went for adoption from the home in 1965.

Having left the home she began a new relationship and had a son who also went for adoption. In 1975, she told the Committee, she married again and had four more children.

Her first and second children, half-siblings, contacted each other and then contacted her and, both aware of the history of abuse within their mother's family, needed jointly to ask her if she would take a DNA test because they were anxious, they said, to confirm whether they are the children of their grandfather, or not.

While still in the home, this next witness had been threatened by her family that she would be 'put out on the road' if she didn't sign adoption papers for her son; she did sign and was then told that her child was going to the USA. She married a year later and went on to have seven children with her husband within the next nine years. Then her husband died and six of her children were placed in institutional care in the 1980s.

In later years, a social worker worked on her behalf to trace her first son but came back to her with the news that not only had he *not* been adopted to the USA but that he had been adopted to a family living near where she herself had lived; unfortunately, he had died in an accident seven years before the search had started. The witness told the Committee that she has 'blanked out' a lot of what has happened to her, but sometimes, she said, 'the memories come flooding back'. What's more, she has had the opportunity to read a medico-legal report on herself. It diagnosed her, she said, as 'suffering from suicidal tendencies and nightmares'.

In 1990, 25 years after leaving the home, a witness told how she received an astonishing telephone call from the nuns there to come back, as there was 'news' for her. On getting there, she was 'utterly shocked'. Her daughter, equally

shocked, was there too. Neither had been told in advance of the other's presence.

'Things initially went well despite the shock' the witness told the Committee, but the relationship did break down and during the 15 years prior to the witness's interview mother and daughter had not been in contact. On her part, the witness said, she 'doesn't feel she has the right to interfere in her daughter's life'.

The next witness was 16 years of age when she fell pregnant, and late at night was brought to a home by her father in a taxi. While there, she was told by the nuns that her grandfather had died and one of them gave her £1 'to get the bus home'. When she got to the house, it was in darkness and there was no-one there (her father was in the UK) but she locked herself in, afraid to turn on the lights in case 'people' figured out that she had returned home. She now fully intended to stay there and never to go back to the home.

When her father arrived home, he agreed to let her stay and later, when it became clear that birth was imminent, drove her to a hospital. (He wanted to adopt the baby but the witness refused to give her up.) She married a local man but did not tell him about her daughter, allowing him to believe that the baby was her sister. The couple went on to have four children, with the witness working locally, and relying on the St Vincent de Paul for help. The daughter of this witness was 15 years old when she discovered that the man she thought of as her father, was not her father.

This next witness moved to the UK having giving birth to a son in a home. The birthfather of this woman's child was a man from another country with whom she had been in a relationship. She left, she told the Committee, because she 'couldn't cope with life in Ireland'.

In the UK, she had 'a shotgun wedding', as she described it, with another man and gave birth to their child, another son. This man, she discovered, was violent, and fearing he would murder her, she left the marriage. She then married again and had a third son, but in later years, her husband, who had come to the UK from abroad, returned to his country of origin. She didn't go with him, she told the Committee, because by then she had grandchildren and wanted to remain 'close' to them.

In the meantime, the son who had been born in the home (and still lived in Ireland) traced her and she came across to meet him here. However, she said: 'Too much, too soon' he moved to the UK and went to live with another of her sons. He was drinking heavily at the time and, she told the Committee, 'he had a lot of issues' although 'while he was very angry, I was very happy'. This son has now married in the UK (his wife telephoned the witness to apologise for his past behaviour) and he has spent time with the witness. 'He is now' she said, 'a different person'.

It was the late 1960s when this next witness had her baby in a home, where, she said, her treatment was 'fine, overall'. She always knew her child would be adopted because neither she nor her family had the means to raise her. She married 15 years later and had two further children; her husband, she told the Committee, knew about this first daughter. Reflecting on her experience in a mother and baby home, she said that 'the hardest part was 'not knowing where her daughter was and if she was safe'. Because of this, throughout her marriage and motherhood, she 'has found it difficult to be emotionally close to them', fearing all the time that 'someone would come and take them'.

At the time she got pregnant, she said, she had 'no option' but to go into the home: 'No-one else would look after you'. Her first daughter traced her and they met for the first time just a year before the witness came for interview; her main reaction to the reunion, she said to the Committee, was 'relief' - on two counts: firstly, that her daughter was safe, and secondly that she had 'got on well in her adoptive home'.

Next is a witness who had been fostered and who told the Committee that in 1961, she had been raped by 'an older man' and became pregnant. She had been 'delighted' she said, when her foster mother came to the home to take both her and her child back home. Within days, however, she was being 'completely ostracised' by this foster mother who was 'increasingly unhappy' with the situation. The nuns called her back into the home together with her daughter, telling the witness she was 'being selfish' - asking her what kind of life she could offer her daughter?', and after some months of resistance, the witness agreed to her child's adoption.

Afterwards, she went to the UK to stay with an aunt, married soon after, and had two more children, but said 'there was no love in it'. (Her husband had told her, she said, that if she had kept her baby, he 'would have had nothing to do with her'.) That

marriage broke down and she married again, this time with a 'supportive' husband and at the time of her interview, they had been together for more than 40 years.

1970s

In the mid-1970s a witness suffered from such severe depression, after her experiences in a mother and baby home from which her son was adopted, that she had been unable to leave her house for many years. The burden grew heavier when she learned that for those years, her son's adoptive parents had sent photographs of him to her via the mother and baby home's address. They were never forwarded.

It was also in the mid-1970s when a woman who was 26 years old and pregnant having suffered a rape, gave birth to a daughter in a home. The two met in later life and while they had 'difficulties' over the years, are on good terms now, the witness told the Committee. Part of the problem between them was that for many years, her daughter believed that the witness had given her up for adoption because she was of mixed race.

It took a long time to complete this birthmother's tracing of this daughter because 'the adoption agency was not helpful, and put 'a barrier between her and her daughter' while also advising her that the process 'would take a long time'. She discovered, however, that both she and her daughter had been trying simultaneously to trace each other and, she told the Committee, 'are now on good terms'.

Another mother who gave birth in the early 1970s had no option but to allow her child to be adopted. Almost immediately after leaving the home, she told the Committee, she became addicted to alcohol. She began the search for her child in the year 2000, but discovered he had taken his own life in 1994.

As for herself, having married an 'abusive and violent' man, she divorced him - and while she subsequently had a long-term relationship, is now single and living with 'her dogs and

cats'. She came to the Committee to tell her story, she said, because: 'Not everything has a happy ending'.

'Two or three' days after giving birth, also in the mid-1970s, this next witness signed a consent to have her baby adopted: 'It was dictated to me what to write. I didn't have a clue what I was signing'. She never married or wanted to, 'for someone to have control over me; I could never give myself to anyone'. 'They made sure that one way or another, you would be punished'.

Meanwhile, a group running a homeless shelter arranged with a mother and baby home to take in a 17-year old woman who became pregnant in the mid-1970s. She and her siblings had spent most of their childhoods in care. This witness kept her son despite 'constant' pressure from the nuns to go the adoption route. She took him to live with her for 18 months in a squat, married the birthfather and had five more boys with him. But, she told the Committee, she had developed an eating disorder because of the small amounts of food she received when in care and during her stay in the home, and now struggles to control her weight being fearful she will 'run out of food'.

During her pregnancies, she was 'afraid to let the public nurse into the house', worried that her children would be 'taken'. She has lost contact with the first son she fought so hard to keep, because he was taking drugs and has become, she told the Committee, a dealer.

In the late 1970s, having given birth in a home another witness said that, without knowing what she was signing, at 17 years of age, she consigned her baby son into the care system. She had two later children with the birthfather, 'a very violent man' who during one attack broke both her eye sockets, her nose, jaw and elbow.

She left him after that attack, living for a year in 'safe houses', then went on to have two further children with a second partner but that relationship did not last. Because of 'severe depression and anxiety' she told the Committee, she 'cannot work'; and revealed to it that she has 'attempted suicide in the past'.

This next witness and her sisters were all sexually abused by their father over a period of years. The witness reported her father to the Gardaí, but then had to leave home before his release from prison as she 'knew he would kill her'.

She went to live in a Laundry, never reintegrated with her family, but became pregnant in the 1970s when she was 18 years old and living with a married man who spent half the week with her and half with his wife. She eventually had six children with him and was in a mother and baby home on three occasions, her first baby dying shortly after birth. She never saw this infant, but did see the 'orange-coloured onion box' in which her child was buried.

Of those six children, one had died, her twins (who suffered from intellectual disabilities) had been adopted, and the witness was rearing the remaining three. (They, however, she told the Committee are also lost to her in a way: 'They now live in a city and are on drugs'). The adoptive father of the twins 'died young' and their adoptive mother remarried. When the witness went to meet this mother and her new husband, she said that the husband 'sexually assaulted her and asked her to take the twins for a month'. She 'could not cope with this', she said, and 'hasn't seen anyone in that family since'.

Prison features in the account of this next witness's journey through her life. In the 1960s, she was 15 years old when she suffered a sexual assault and became pregnant. Her parents went to the Gardaí but the perpetrator spent only one night in prison and then her family, who had adopted their grandchild and were raising her as their own daughter, took this man to court, suing for maintenance. Years later, the witness sought 'justice' for her daughter by trying to have her included in her birthfather's will; but she was advised that her daughter had no rights since she had been legally adopted - but a financial settlement was, however, reached.

This witness had her first child in a mother and baby home in 1970, but acquiesced to the demands that she should consent to adoption and gave up her child. She married in 1979 and had three more children with her husband, who, she said, was 'physically abusive' (he ended up going to jail at one stage, she said, because 'he had to go out robbing to support his family', but he left the marriage, and has since been with a new

partner.) The witness also told the Committee that one of her daughters has 'health issues' and she believes that this represents 'some kind of retribution' for her having given up her first baby.

Another witness said that at the onset of labour, she took a bus to a maternity hospital as she was afraid that should she give birth in the mother and baby home, 'my baby would be taken away from me'. After giving birth, she and the baby went to live with her boyfriend's mother. They later married and he was violent to her. She said that she had sex again with her husband 'only because she wanted a companion for her first child and didn't want her to grow up alone;' she had not had sex since then, finding the thought of it 'repulsive'.

She got a 'decent job', additionally working weekends in bars and restaurants to save for a mortgage; and with those savings and some help from her family, managed to buy her house. However, she became an alcoholic and suffered from mental health issues, at one point spending a year and a half in a psychiatric hospital. Her daughter became a single mother when she was 18 years old. Her son began taking drugs when he was 13 years old. He is now a heroin addict and has served two 'lengthy terms of imprisonment,' incarcerated for the first time when he was 18 years old.

'If I had a dream', she said to the Committee, 'it would be just me, my daughter and my granddaughter living together. I hate men. I am always waiting for something bad to happen. All my life I never had help from anyone, anytime I would go looking for help it wouldn't be there'.

After giving birth to their child in a home in the middle of the 1970s, this mother initially made every effort to avoid contact with the birthfather 'because he was violent and aggressive', but did go on to marry him and they had three more children together. When he died five years later, she confided to the Committee that 'it was a release and everything calmed down'. She got a job in a local factory, spent time at home rearing her children, and now minds her grandchildren.

Another witness, who gave birth in a home during the 1970s, told the Committee that a priest, 'in his 30s' sexually abused her 'regularly - multiple times', there, saying to her: 'It doesn't matter because you're already pregnant. You do this and I'll pray for your soul'. She exonerated 'an older chaplain, who was not abusive', but when she left the home this younger one traced her. He called to the house, then drove the witness and

a friend of hers to a bar. She told the Committee that 'he tried to get rid of' her friend: 'But we went to the bathroom and escaped'.

'I'm angry', she told the Committee, 'I'm angry at how the people that wore the cross of Jesus described us when they're supposed to have love in their hearts for everything and everybody. I'm angry at what they done to other girls, took away their babies, how they made you feel. I'm angry at the Catholic church'.

- 'My boyfriend moved away with his entire family' (when this witness's pregnancy was discovered.)
- 'My mother said if she found any photos of the baby she would burn them'.
- 'To this day I can't pick up a baby. I might contaminate them. I was a leper'.

This next mother, who became pregnant, at the age of 17 in the early 1970s, was told that her baby son had gone for adoption. Having left the home, she re-connected with the birthfather, figuring that this was the only way to have her child returned to her. She had two more children with him.

She herself had been fostered from the age of seven years old and had been abused and raped by her foster father. Maltreatment continued within her marriage with her husband 'severely' beating her and all three children (including a one-year old) in its course. Her two eldest children, she told the Committee, do not speak to her now because of the physical abuse they suffered, because they continue to believe she allowed it to happen. Her search for her first child concluded when she discovered 'he had been in the home the whole time'.

Another witness from this decade married the father of her 'home baby' (without revealing to him that he was the father) - she told the Committee that she had gone on to have five more children with him and because of what had happened to her during her first birth, she had 'dreaded' each labour. She said she then noticed how much better she had been treated in general during these later births and that there had also been an improvement in the levels of medical care provided.

Another woman told the Committee that she finds it too upsetting 'even to *think* back to that time in the home; she had bonded with her baby for three months before she had to 'hand him over'. She did marry and have other children - but both birthmother and

adopted son had begun searching for each other for many years, until (not long before the witness came for interview) they were reunited. Their relationship, said the witness, 'has gone from strength to strength', the only drawback being her husband's 'reluctance to engage, so 'I have to hide when meeting my son'.

A 16-year old girl gave birth in a home in the mid-1970s and after she left, married a man who beat her, broke her nose and caused her to have two stillborn babies. He was violent with his children, attacked the witness on the street outside their house and during the marriage, raped her repeatedly. She then went with another man who also treated her badly. But when she came to the Committee, she said she had been with a 'nice' partner for four years.

With her baby set for adoption in the early 1980s, a 17-year old girl was made to feel she had 'blackened' the family name. 'My sister tortured me, was pure nasty' and as an escape, she began to drink heavily: 'People don't act in a self-destructive manner for no reason'. She suffered from PTSD and depression for 10 years and had 'a number of breakdowns - everything I had ever repressed just exploded'.

Also in the early 1980s, a 17-year old girl who had her baby in a home was forced by her mother to have the baby adopted. This witness and her boyfriend had been together since they were 10 years old, 'really loved each other' and had wanted to keep their baby. But a short time after the baby was given away, the witness's mother began 'attempting suicide in different ways.' The witness found her 'with her head in the oven, with slit wrists, having taking overdoses'.

Her mother did die by suicide two years after the baby was adopted and it was only then that the witness discovered that her mother had been in a Magdalen laundry when she was younger and believes this may have been the cause of all this distress, especially why her mother had reacted so badly to the witness's pregnancy.

Some quotes taken from the testimonies of witnesses:

- 'I had a panic attack when I decided to sleep with my partner for the first time; it brought back memories of a previous rape'. 'At that time they didn't call it 'rape'.

- 'The adoption process knocked my confidence; I lived on anti-depressants'.
- 'The people I knew fell away'.
- 'I had a back-street abortion because I couldn't face going through it again. I wanted to ask the Pope for forgiveness'.
- 'You will get over losing a man but you won't get over losing a child'.
- 'The social worker said I had the choice of running away with my child 'or else we'll take the child off you'. (From a witness who was living with her child's violent birthfather.)
- 'I've grieved the loss of my family, even though they're not dead'.
- 'I was given away by my mother so I wasn't going to give my baby away'.

The next witness, who was engaged to be married, had her baby at home in 1970 and they were both taken to a mother and baby home. However, she suffered a post-partum haemorrhage, and had to go to hospital for transfusions and was then taken to a nursing home. All she was told about her son was that he had been 'taken' - she had no idea where. Her father did not speak to her for a year after she had her baby because she had 'let down the family', her boyfriend/ fiancé would not resile from his position that he was not the birthfather, so clearly she was not bound for marriage. However, she did marry in 1974 'to take away the stigma' and went on to have children. She is now divorced.

'Looking for her son' she told the Committee, 'took over her life'. She found herself for instance, buying newspapers to check if any child had died so she could try and figure out if it could be him. She traced him eventually, met him in 2002 and although her ex-boyfriend 'to this day' does not accept his paternity, 'meeting her son has given her peace of mind. She has a good ongoing relationship with him and is glad to know he's had a good upbringing and a good life'.

In a home with her baby in 1970, this next witness was told that her son 'was the devil's child and would die' - and then 'they took him away'. Having left the home, she decided to go to England to look for him (someone had told her that was where he had been sent) but during a medical examination it was discovered she was again pregnant. She went back to the home and gave birth to another son. She did meet

the first son but many, many years later. He had 'problems with alcohol' and they do not have much contact now. Her second son does not want to see her.

A witness told the Committee that she is still in contact with a nun who was 'very kind' to her when she was 'kicked out' of home and sent to a laundry. She married and divorced and said that her 'past was used against her' during the proceedings.

The next witness had a daughter in a home in 1973 who was adopted to the USA. The witness later took a nursing job abroad where she met her husband; she told him straight away about her backstory and how she could never have more children because of her deep fear of them being taken away from her. He was very understanding and they adopted a son.

Back home, the mother of the witness spotted an ad in the local paper; it had been taken out by the daughter she had given up and who was now searching for her. They met together with the daughter's adoptive family but the witness commented to the Committee that 'once the tie is severed, there's no going back' and in any case, she said, 'the relationship with her daughter is strained - in relation to her adopted son'.

Another witness told the Committee that she wanted to keep her baby but whose parents would not allow it 'because of the neighbours'. She too went on to be a nurse for 35 years. She had another child in 1990, this one she kept and reared. Her adopted daughter traced her in 2015 and they have remained 'close' ever since.

A witness who had been 15 years old when having her child, said that she had just simply 'handed him over' to be adopted, without any real understanding of what she was doing. Her parents had placed her in a laundry when she was 12 years old, because she had been 'wild and unmanageable' at home. A year after she had left the home, she was raped while living on the streets and, falling pregnant again, returned to the home, determined this time to keep her child.

She and her six-month old son went to live with an uncle for a time but he sexually abused her and would 'lock her into her room'. She escaped from him and within 'another couple of years' had met another (older) man and had two more children with him. But he too, it turned out, was abusive and the relationship ended. The witness began to suffer from mental health difficulties and then fell into alcoholism - but at the time she spoke to the Confidential Committee had been sober for several years. She

has not sought to trace her first son as she feels it is for him to find her. She has a strained relationship with her second one, while continuing to 'feel worthless' and to 'struggle with day to day life'.

To reward her daughter (in advance, before her new baby was adopted) the mother of this next witness gave her the gift of a bracelet 'for being a good girl' when all she wanted 'was her baby back'. Her sister, meanwhile, revealed to her that she too had had a baby 'secretly' in the UK but had had the child adopted there, advising the witness that she should 'just move on and forget about it'. Her father did make enquiries about keeping the child but was told 'she was settled with a new family'.

Her mother increased the pressure on the witness to send her child for adoption but the witness was adamant this would not happen. She told the Committee, when the nuns in the home saw she was not for turning, they accepted her decision and were 'helpful', supplying her with what she might need for the baby. The accommodation she had secured for herself and her daughter didn't work out and she ended up in a squat before eventually moving back home. Her mother would not let her stay, however, as yet another sister had now had a baby and this mother would not deal with more than one child in her house.

A witness who fell pregnant at 22 when she had been 'seeing' an older man since she was 16 years old, said that when she broke the news to her mother and father their initial response was wanting her to 'get rid of the baby'. When she returned home after the birth, a nun from the home where her son had been born sent her a picture of him.

The witness told the Committee that when her mother saw this picture, she was 'over the moon'; when her father saw it, he said he 'wanted the child home'. These parents ended up adopting her son and while the witness said that 'at the start' she was affected by 'the whole experience' she got to the stage where she would 'always tell people about her son and never made a secret of it'.

From that same year of 1978, a witness, who at 20 years old gave birth in a home, had to face into 'years of counselling' because 'I had done what I was told by allowing the

decision to have my child adopted made for me by others, including my family. It was taken out of my hands even before I entered the home. It was done and there was no discussion about it'. After her daughter was born, she went back to work 'as though nothing had happened' and for 20 years never spoke about it, refusing to discuss it even with her brother on the one occasion he tried to. She also 'disengaged', she told the Committee, even from 'friends she had made while in the home as they were just a reminder of that time'.

Unfortunately, she became an alcoholic, although managing to function, but at one stage, was 'called aside' at work, joined a support organisation and in sobriety began to consider tracing her daughter. They have now met but the witness commented that she feels 'very much on the edge' of her daughter's life. This witness never went on to marry, and believes that her experience 'impacted on relationships I've had since'. She does accept that while adoption was the only option at the time, she continues to 'feel strongly' about the decision being made without her involvement.

As an interesting aside to this story, the witness had been working in a state body when she became pregnant and on confiding in her supervisor, the latter (who, she said was 'very supportive') arranged for her to be certified as absent from work 'on sick leave' so she would not have 'unmarried mother' entered on her personnel file.

This next witness struggled with addictions to alcohol and other substances. Her first child was adopted immediately after she gave birth to him in 1979, at 16 years old. In 1981 she had a son with the same birthfather, and it was he who also fathered her third child, this one, a daughter, after the couple married in 1984. Tragically this third child died after 'a misdiagnosis and receiving the incorrect medication' and the witness commented to the Committee that having giving birth to three children, she now had only one. She said looking back, that leaving her first son in the hospital, was in many ways worse than the death of her daughter, as 'there was no closure in it'.

Yet another witness told the Committee that she too has 'struggled with alcoholism to block things out'. The daughter she gave up for adoption - now divorced - has refused to let the witness see her grandchildren, informing her that she has to 'earn the right to see them'. This witness has also 'lost some friends 'because my parents had warned them to stay away' - but she does acknowledge that her parents have been 'very good to her daughter and treated her very well'.

After this next witness gave birth at 16 years of age, her baby daughter was put up for adoption by the witness's family - who were, she said to the Committee, 'dysfunctional, acrimonious and violent'. Back at home, without her baby, she said, she was 'a total mess and suffering from post-natal depression'. Her mother did send her to the doctor, but was terrified she would reveal 'the secret'. From the doctor's surgery, the girl was referred on to a psychiatric hospital and she confided what had happened to her to the doctors there, but on learning this, her mother took her out of the place and she was beaten.

About a year later she met someone else, became pregnant again, the birthfather vanished again, and again her mother brought her to the home, where she was admitted as 'a second offender'. She gave birth and yielded to pressure to give up this baby too. She married at 21 years of age and went on to have nine miscarriages - which led to 'severe' problems in the marriage, she told the Committee, 'and a separation from her husband'. She attributes her gynaecological problems to (mis)management of her second birth.

Meanwhile, in later years having been 'given the run-around' when trying to trace her two adopted daughters, she hired a private investigator who found both within 'a couple of weeks'. Sadly, one has died since, following 'an overdose', but she has 'a good relationship' with the other one.

1980s

The stigma attached to being a single mother, 'when it is said that no-one would want you, a seed of doubt is sown and it stays with you'. This is from a witness who gave birth in a home in 1981, kept her daughter, brought her to the UK with her and worked there, before moving back to Ireland.

Thinking back to her time in the home, she now accepts that while she wanted to get out of there as soon as she entered it, 'there were some women there who did not have any choice and were 'relieved' that someone was taking the baby'.

This next witness 'fought and fought and fought' to keep her baby to whom she gave birth in 1982 at 17 years old. Then with the help of her father who had visited her one day, she achieved her goal. 'Only for him', she believes - 'the baby would have been taken'. Her father continued to support her in keeping her child, but, she told the Committee, once home, 'the attention I got from people wasn't good - at Mass the priest wouldn't give me Communion'.

'You'd think it was somehow enlightened in the 1980s, but it wasn't' - this from a witness who nonetheless accepted that while there was a (slightly discernible) change in society's view of 'fallen' women, it was hit and miss.

Having given birth in 1981 when she was 20 years old, this woman had come under pressure to have her daughter adopted but had insisted that this was not to happen, although she had been worrying about how she would manage, not least financially. When she did get home, however, she found that her 'welfare cheques' had been sent there in error and had mounted to £450: 'This was a lifeline and meant I could keep my daughter'.

When she moved to a city with her daughter, a neighbour gave her details of part-time work and 'a friend would watch the child' while she was out. As for family, however, she told the Committee that when she and the baby went to visit the family home from time to time, her father would come to collect them from the train station but would throw his coat over the baby's head to hide her.

Despite going on to have a rewarding professional career in the UK, the next witness confessed to the Committee that she still 'feels bad' about having her baby adopted, and having given in to the 'secrecy' insisted on by her family - who, when she was leaving for her new life, told her not to come back. 'I hadn't robbed, stolen or murdered, I just made a stupid mistake', but, she said, I still battle with 'shame' and 'guilt' and 'proving that I wasn't just some stupid young girl who got pregnant'.

She has made ongoing attempts to reunite with her daughter but the response to date has been painful because up to the time she spoke to the Committee, her daughter had not wanted to meet her.

'Running all the time and cannot settle' is how this woman, who at the age of 18, gave birth to a boy, whom she had named and had baptised, before he was 'taken', described her life. Four months later, she, her sister and her sister's husband went to

take him back to the family home, but the witness then had 'rows and arguments' with her parents who were trying to force her to marry the birthfather. In the end, they adopted the little boy, raising him as the brother of the witness and it wasn't until later years that he discovered the truth.

This witness had three more children by three different men, but none of these relationships worked out and she is single now. Her relationship with her three children is 'difficult' and she feels she has 'struggled all her life' on her own.

'I lost my mother 30 years ago', said this witness who became pregnant when she was 15 years old. Her mother was very concerned about 'what the neighbours would think', she said but eventually, influenced by the witness's father, gave in and allowed mother and baby to come home. The relationship between them has 'remained difficult'.

With both parents deceased, another 15-year old went to stay with an aunt having given birth to a son in 1986 - but this aunt had five children already so she moved back to the family home, living with her baby in a mobile home in its back garden. Despite her age and lack of family support, she said to the Committee, she had no official visitors checking up on her.

She went on to have another child by another man and he too, like the birthfather of her son, vanished on hearing the pregnancy news. She has since married and is happy, worked when her two children were young, went back to education when she was 35 years old, got a diploma, and continues to work. 'Everything is in the past now but I think how easily things could have turned out differently and I would not have my son'.

'It was the outside world that made things difficult' said a witness who at 17 years of age, became pregnant and had a daughter in a home. On learning she was in a home, her father was supportive, came to fetch her and bring her home.

But the witness herself wanted to stay a bit longer as she needed the help of the nuns, being unable to face the 'shame' on the outside. Her father tried to console her, telling her she was 'to keep the baby and not to worry about it'. Contrary to what the Committee heard from some witnesses, she said

that 'the nuns in the home were 'very nice' about her wanting to keep her baby and even gave her 'some items' to take with her.

On the contrary, though, she reported that on discovering that she was keeping her daughter, her social worker 'didn't want anything more to do with her'.

This next witness became pregnant while in university, never told her boyfriend - and in any case, the relationship had no future; he was of a different religion and her family would not have tolerated a union. The decision about the adoption of her child (a son, born in 1983) was taken out of her hands. She told the Committee she had been 'profoundly affected' by the whole experience, did not have sex for 16 years and went on to suffer multiple problems - with alcohol, with severe depression, and not least with anorexia.

Seeking help, she did contact the home where she had been confined but the nuns referred her to the priest who had attended her there; they spoke at length about her distress and when she was leaving him, he embraced her, told her she was 'beautiful' and attempted to kiss her.

'Everything kicked off' when this next witness had her second child, having given birth to the first in a mother and baby home in 1985. This second child, she said, was 'gorgeous' but she could not cope and had to seek counselling. She eventually traced and met her son in 2014, but saw herself as 'a kind of aunt figure' in his life. She is 'very appreciative and thankful' to anyone who has loved and cared for him over the years, in particular his adoptive family.

On the advice of social workers, a birthmother placed her baby son (born in 1987) in foster care while she 'got her head straight'. She continued to visit her son, 'but he didn't know who I was. It broke my heart'. Recognising that he was bonding with his foster family, she took him back, went into a home with him, remaining there for two years while she attended college. (During this period she would make occasional visits back home to her family but 'had to hide upstairs'.)

She and her son were given council housing but 'it was in a very rough area - where it was made clear I wasn't wanted'. They left and stayed with various friends for a while until she got housed again when her son was three years old. She did 'odd jobs' while

being back in college to complete a degree; she later secured a 'good' job and moved to the UK.

She told the Committee that social workers had exerted considerable pressure on her to have her son adopted, telling her 'she had nothing to offer him'; her father, too, insisted she give him up, saying he would pay for her education if she did, but would 'cut her off financially' if she didn't. He kept his promise, she kept her son. She has never married or had other children and believes this is as a result of what she has been through. She still feels she has been stigmatised, not helped by her son having been diagnosed with ADHD, undetected while he was in school, and his teachers attributing his behaviour to her 'being a single mother and unable to cope'.

This next witness was raped by a friend of her boyfriend and became pregnant when she was 24 years old and living abroad. Her boyfriend was not supportive - and neither was her family 'who put a lot of shame and stigma' on her and gave her the message repeatedly that she was 'not fit to be a mother'. Her relationship with them, 'forever fractured', she went into a home where she gave birth to a son in 1989.

Having been led to believe that she could still get her baby back despite signing papers, she agreed to have him fostered. While initially she visited him in his foster home, she 'hardly recognised him', and 'began to feel that she was intruding on the foster family'. She went back to University, married in 2000 and had other children but told the Committee she could never enjoy her pregnancies because of her earlier experience.

Contact has been made with her son, she told the Committee, but their reunion 'has turned her life upside down;' her siblings are unhappy with her for bringing 'it' all back up, believing she was putting their mother 'in a bad light', and as for her son, he has struggled with his mental health, blames the witness, and is resentful of her other children. She now believes, she said, that 'adoption is as irrevocable as death'.

When she was 16 years old, a witness's desire to keep her baby was thwarted, she said. She went into a home to have her baby. This was in 1989 when, as other witnesses noted during this decade, circumstances and attitudes did seem (slowly) to be changing, yet, she told the Committee she was given 'no option to keep my baby, or offered any choices' in

the matter. Her experience, she said, had 'impacted and affected every aspect' of her life and has left 'an indelible mark'.

Despite returning to school and having been a very good student, she became 'of no use. I couldn't concentrate'. She dropped out of college and married at the age of 22, because she said, she was looking for security and 'someone to love me'. Her husband has been a huge support to her, but in her view, she has never 'fulfilled her potential in her career'. To enable later tracing, she remained in constant contact with social workers throughout; she and her daughter have since met and have a 'strong relationship'. She remains 'very aggrieved' she said, that she was not offered any counselling at the time she was pregnant and giving birth at such a young age. 'Everything was in the best interests of the child but they forgot that I was a child too'. 'At that time I would have to justify why I would want to keep my child, now you would have to explain why you would give your child away'.

1990s

A mother told the Committee about what happened to her in the early part of the 1990s. She had been in two homes and spoke about the aftermath of her birth to twins, and her relationship with the children's father, who was of foreign origin. She was 26 years old and the birthfather was living abroad. When she discovered she was pregnant, went to visit him to discuss the matter. He wanted her to have an abortion and although reluctant to do that, she did agree to attend a gynaecologist. When making the appointment, however, she discovered that he had already made it. He was a priest, a member of a religious order and not long ordained. She said he had spoken to her about 'possibly' leaving the priesthood but she told the Committee that she will never forgive herself for getting involved with him: 'I have lived with the shame and guilt about doing such a naïve and stupid thing. I knew this was controversial'.

Back in Ireland after that visit to him, she moved into a mother and baby home to wait out her pregnancy and contrary to the descriptions given by so many women and girls of the conditions they suffered in earlier decades, she described this home as 'a haven and a sanctuary' where she 'never felt she was being judged', but was 'cared for as a pregnant woman in crisis'. 'I'm glad I managed to find it, I had to do the footwork myself'.

She gave birth to twins and afterwards, their birthfather regularly came to visit her and their children while she remained in the home. However, she told the Committee, 'he raped me'. She said, 'he also threatened to circumcise the children with a breadknife'. She stopped him from having access to the children, but he went to court and got an Order for Supervised Access and she moved with the babies to a different home, one offering her an individual flatlet.

However, pressure to have her children adopted was again coming from her family, who had always wanted her to take the adoption route because of the stigma not just the witness herself but them too. When her pregnancy became known, she had to leave her home town. She 'might', she said to the Committee, 'get a visit from family members once a year'. 'I was on my own'. She worked part-time for several years but found - and still finds, she said - that it is 'very difficult' to make ends meet. Initially, she had had enough money to buy 'cots and clothes' for her children, funded by her weekly Unmarried Mothers' Allowance, along with the extra £50 a week she had been granted by the birthfather's Order. When she came to give evidence to the Committee, she told it she was now 'on the dole'.

This next witness, at 21 years of age, had a daughter in 1994. She came from 'a very middle class area' but one where the neighbours 'staunchly disapproved' of her pregnancy. Her mother had died after a long illness, her boyfriend had disappeared and when she told her father he was gone and she would not be marrying him, he would not allow her to stay in the family home.

He, she told the Confidential Committee, then told her younger siblings to 'toughen up and forget about' her, which, she said, 'they did'. She also told the Committee that during the following six years, when she and her daughter were living in 'charitable' housing, her siblings were 'bought houses and given credit cards' by her father. She told the Committee that this is something about which she is 'extremely bitter to this day'. She realised that she could not raise her daughter in that environment so her

father gave her enough money to buy a house in a very remote part of a rural county, where they lived a 'very isolated existence' and where the little girl experienced 'difficulties and bullying' in school because of her background.

They stuck it out for a further six years, then the witness sold the house and moved back to a city, where she again took up work (she had always worked but it was always 'low-income' employment, so she had found it very difficult to get off social welfare.) At the time of her interview with the Confidential Committee, she and her daughter were living in 'a garden flat' in her father's house and she said that her daughter now 'feels the stigma of having been born to a single mother'. As for her father, she believes he now feels guilty.

In 1996, an 18 year old woman had 'just started college when she became pregnant. She thought at the time that she would be supported by her parents, but such support was not forthcoming - their expectation was that this baby, when it was born, was for immediate adoption - but that, the witness said, 'was not going to happen'. She secured help from a social worker, went her own way and stuck it out with her son.

There was a breakthrough, however, when eventually her family invited her to come home for Christmas. Some contact resumed although she still had to support herself and her son. She secured accommodation for nine years, returned to college and then got a job. Her relationship with her mother was 'adversely effected' but her mother now has a relationship with the witness's son and the witness sees this as 'an indication of her mother's 'regret' about the way she treated her.

A quote from yet another witness of this period: 'The priest asked (the witness's future husband) 'are you sure you know her? Do you know she had a baby and gave her up?'

Or this one: 'I remember having this chubby little guy, I used to call him Jumbo, and he was mine and I used to feed him, change him and then one day he was done up like a Christmas tree and he disappeared'.

'Thank God for the UK', said a witness, one of those who had left Ireland for 'across the water' shortly after leaving the mother and baby home, having given birth there at the age of 17. She has had two 15-year marriages, and yet felt she should tell the Confidential Committee that her experience in a mother and baby home still causes

her 'grief and despair. Everything that happened in Ireland I've been surviving', she said, 'the pain lasted for years and I've been left with emotional scars for which there is no relief'. 'I still carry the 17-year old with me'.

In describing their lives after leaving the mother and baby home many women who came to the committee spoke of difficulties in later life. Even those who had married and had other children disclosed that they had suffered from deep feelings of isolation, lack of self-worth and loneliness as well as shame and anger.

Tracing

Witnesses came to the Committee to tell of their experiences in mother and baby homes and afterwards - but also felt it necessary to round off their narratives with the story of how they got on with tracing. For a good proportion of these seekers, unfortunately, even when the search was successful, it was too late. For others, a birthmother, when found, was still suffering from feelings of 'shame and blame' and had not revealed their secret to their husbands or natural children and were fearful of doing so. As for the birthmothers, some deeply yearned to contact their lost children but some had worked so hard to move on from what had been deep trauma, when a son or daughter came calling, they simply did not want to know.

'A social worker was assigned to me and I got a phone call saying that my parents had been found, but my father was dead, then I was told he was alive, then I was told he was dead again'.

'Every place I tried to look for information, I got no response - Irish Government, nuns, adoption agency...' this was a statement from a witness adopted into America in the early 1960s and who began to trace her birthmother when she was 18 years old.

The Committee did encounter a few who, having successfully traced birth families, subsequently rued not paying attention to the adage: 'be careful what you wish for'.

Take this witness, born in the late 1960s into a home and then, with her six siblings, was raised in care. When her tracing of these siblings was successful: 'They were not at all what I had been expecting, and I wish now I'd never found them' she said to the Confidential Committee, adding that she had been 'horrified by the appearance of some of my brothers' and now has 'no real relationship' with any of them.

On the other side of the equation, some of the children born in mother and baby homes and subsequently fostered or adopted, searched for their birthmothers, only to be, in their view, hindered, not just by the officialdom of those early years, but by the lingering sense of stigma felt by these mothers who did not want to be traced. Some mothers, having 'moved on', simply did not want to be discovered. Some children never discovered the identities of their birth parents at all.

'I was the skeleton in the cupboard', one witness said to the Committee who had found documents in his foster parents' home, some of which contained his birthmother's name, enabling him to start the search. He did make contact with some of his extended family 'but they were not forthcoming with information'. He also discovered that his grandfather had 'provided for him' in his will, but he had never been told of this...

A woman, born in 1942 and later transferred to a home with her mother, was later brought up in state care, but also worked in a Magdalen laundry. She began trying to trace her mother when she was getting married, as she wanted to source any medical records available for when she had children. She began her tracing by going back to the home, but with no tangible success, although she was told by one of the nuns: 'You look like your mother!'

At one stage, this witness had been told there that her mother had been a prostitute and 'was now deceased'. She didn't believe this but continued her search by using a specialist agency and eventually, was told that her mother was living in a certain suburb; but she had spotted the actual address on her birthmother's file. She went there 'without prior notice' discovering that while her mother had lived at that address for 61 years, she had just recently died. When she did get the records, she told the Committee that they were in 'an appalling state, with a lot of information either scribbled out or incorrect'.

A man, born in a home and later boarded out to foster care, told the Committee that he began to search for his files in 1963, but was 'denied them' until he finally got them in 2014 through his solicitor; they contained all the information he needed. A year later in 2015, he discovered that he had had a sister born in the same home, who had died when she was 10 months old. (The totality of what those files revealed about her is that she died of 'convulsions'.) He has not been able to source information about where she might be buried; and he continues to harbour the suspicion that she had been adopted and may even be still alive.

This next witness, another male, came to the Confidential Committee to tell it that he had grown up in state and foster care until he ran away at 16 years of age. He 'always wanted to know about (his) mother', and he did manage to get her birth certificate and using the details on it, did get to trace her '30 years ago'. They met and she told him she had married his birthfather - but had never told him about the witness. During that

meeting, she made the witness 'swear not to tell any other relatives' while she was still living. Before this meeting took place, the witness's birthfather had died, unaware of his son's existence. When his mother died, the witness did not get to attend her funeral as he only heard that she had died when the funeral was already over.

A witness born in a home in the late 1950s began to trace his mother in 1995 but when he contacted the agency that had handled his adoption, was told 'you're in a queue'. This agency finally handed over his birthmother's address in 1997, but also told him that she had died. He became very angry, stating for the benefit of the Confidential Committee that his mother 'had never moved house' and that he believes this agency 'waited until she was dead' before telling him that they knew where she was. He described the Catholic Church and the Irish system as an 'abusive, sinister mafia'.

Similarly, another male witness whose search for his birthmother had been successful ('I brought her flowers and photos. We went for dinner') was told by her that she had had another baby with the witness's birthfather five years earlier, and in the same home. That baby, he was told, had died. He had obtained certificates of birth and death for this child 'but I don't believe it'. He told the Committee that 'he has lived with the hope of finding his sibling but his biggest fear is that 'he was one of the babies buried without any proper records. I don't believe that certificate we got. I think the child was taken and sold by the church. I'm convinced there was something'.

A witness born in a mother and baby home, (like her mother before her), told the Committee, she was constantly asking: 'Where's my mummy?' and as soon as she finished school, went to the home where she had been born, knocked on the door and asked to speak 'to the head nun'. 'They slammed the door in my face'. She went to the home again, 'four or five times' seeking information, 'but they were very rude to me'.

Then a social worker found someone who was also searching for the witness's mother - he turned out to be the witness's half-brother and together, they traced their mother to an address in the UK. When the witness asked her birthmother: 'Would you like me to stay in touch with you?' The 'very cold' answer was: 'I'd rather not'.

A witness told the Committee that she 'occasionally' looks at photographs on Facebook of her half-brothers and sisters 'who do not know of my existence'. As a child, she had been

told that her parents had been killed in a car accident and it 'came as a total shock to her to discover she had been born in a mother and baby home'. Her adoptive mother, she found out, had gone to the home seeking information on her behalf but was reminded by a nun that (during the adoption process) she had taken a vow never to trace the child's natural mother.

The witness did manage to get her file from the home 'but it was heavily redacted'. However, by going through records and phone books she did trace both of her parents, their addresses and families. She and her birthmother had three phone conversations, she said, during which she learned that the pregnancy had resulted from a rape by the witness's father. During all three calls, she added, her mother had been 'courteous' but finally told the witness that she was not interested in a face-to-face meeting or in establishing a relationship.

A birthmother, who had given birth to a son in a home in the early 1950s, decided to trace him when she was 70 years of age - starting with agencies and Government departments where she found 'reluctance' to help her. On contacting the home in 2004 in search of information about him, she was 'abruptly' informed that he had died.

She had kept her home informed of her current address in case he had wished to contact her. She (later) found out:

- that her son had travelled from America to find her and had been told by these nuns that 'they couldn't help him', with one nun telling him that his mother had 'abandoned' him when he was two weeks old and that 'her whereabouts were unknown'.
- that he had paid these nuns 'a large sum of money' to have his ashes buried in the grounds of this home in case his mother came looking for him; the witness was not told this by the nuns on either occasion she had been in the home seeking information.
- that his adoptive parents had also paid a sum of money to the home in connection with his adoption and 'made annual donations'.

When this next witness, born in a home and then adopted in the mid-1960s, began to trace her mother, she encountered the kind of delays and barriers frequently mentioned by other witnesses bound on the same mission. In addition, she was critical of a social worker 'who behaved as though the witness was causing her mother 'great distress' because of this search, and told the Confidential Committee that this social worker had failed to pass on letters she had written to her mother - which she felt was 'cruel' - as was the fact that she wasn't told 'for two months' that her mother 'had responded'. However, this one ended well. The witness was reunited with her mother and said she gets on 'wonderfully' with her, and with her half-siblings.

Another witness described how her mother was 'very angry' at being found. She complained to the witness that 'she had been guaranteed secrecy and didn't want to go back to revisit the past'.

Sometime later, however, the witness told the Committee, her mother did make contact and they had a couple of 'pleasant' meetings - but these have now ceased because her mother was moving in with (another) daughter and said 'she would find it very hard to keep the secret'.

Having been raped and made pregnant by her foster father and put into a home to give birth in the early 1960s, this next witness relayed another story relating to a social worker, who, she said served as social worker for both herself and the son to whom she gave birth - 'assigned' to both throughout their lives. 'She never connected us', the witness told the Committee.

As an adult, this witness, trying to trace his birthmother, approached the mother and baby home in which he had been born also in the early 1960s, but, he told the Committee. 'They showed me only a copy book that showed she had paid in full while she was in the home'.

In 2002, another witness (born in a home in the mid-1960s) began the process of tracing her birthmother and was given the relevant telephone number to call by an agency. Having left messages on an answering machine for several months, she was then contacted by a nun 'who was extremely rude and unhelpful'. As a result, she

'stopped tracing efforts for a year' then resumed, contacting the original agency and explaining what had previously happened with that nun.

From then on, with agency personnel making the contacts on her behalf, she told the Committee that she was 'bombarded with information and family involvement', discovering, for instance, that nine years before she discovered her birthmother's identity, she had died from contracting Hepatitis C from contaminated blood products. But she did meet her mother's sister before she too died.

This next witness was advised by the same agency as the one above, and 'made sure' that the file they had on her included her wish that should her son approach it while he was trying to find her, he should be given 'full assistance'.

But later, she learned from her son himself that when he did come to Ireland from the US to trace her, he had gone to the home where he was born and was told by a priest who lived nearby that she had died.

On returning to the US and in conversation with an Irish couple he knew, he mentioned what had happened. They advised him not to believe this priest but to contact the agency directly. He took the advice and from both his own and his birthmother's points of view, got terrific results, which meant that they were put in touch with each other and the witness flew to the US to meet him. He collected her from the airport and they went for a walk on the beach together and later on, she spent a six-week holiday there with him. She told the Committee that this agency had been of 'great assistance' in helping with this successful reunion.

To get her birth certificate, a witness had to go to a solicitor to 'swear an affidavit' that she would not contact her birthmother unless it was through a named agency. Personnel there, however, informed her that this agency's responsibility was towards the mother. 'It failed to recognise', the witness said to the Committee, 'that they also had a responsibility towards the child'.

This agency did, she said, 'send a letter' to the witness's mother on her behalf. (She herself was simultaneously tracing, she said 'for the sake of her own children' in order that 'they can know their lineage'.) But in contrast to the successful tracing outcome for the last witness, this witness's mother phoned the agency to say she didn't want any further contact.

'Files are there one day and not the next. The agency through which I was adopted no longer existed. I got documents and details in a piecemeal fashion', - this witness faced many barriers in trying to locate her birthmother. One of the nuns mentioned in her file had 'no memory' of the witness when the witness contacted her. Of mixed race and born in the 1960s, she had been adopted and came to the Committee to talk about her experiences, particularly about her belief that while she could agree with the right of a birthmother to privacy, her own right to information about herself should be in balance with that; 'at the very least I should have a right to access medical information so I can pass it on to my children'.

The trace was ultimately successful, but, sadly, the meeting with her mother was not: 'she was hostile and had not wanted to be found;' and she described her mother to the Committee as 'cagey' and 'wanting to know what I wanted...' Sometime later her birthmother's other daughter contacted her to tell her to 'cease associations as it was too upsetting'. The witness complied.

This man's adoptive parents 'had pretended' they were his adoptive sister's birth parents and had written their names on her birth certificate 'to try and camouflage the whole thing'. The tracing process took between five and six years and, the witness told the Committee, 'there was no paper trail', but his birthmother was found; what helped, he said was that 'the social worker had disclosed information. He wrote his mother 'a very straightforward letter'. I said *things had happened in the past and things were different now...* 'She wrote back', he told the Committee, with 'a very sorrowful letter'. However, he wrote again, telling her that her letter *was the best Christmas present I ever got!*

When they did meet, in a hotel in 2011, he discovered his birth parents had married and that he had three sisters - information that his adoptive mother had never passed on to him. His mother also told him she'd *had to* have him adopted because of 'social shame' but had been unable to talk about her time in the mother and baby home because 'she is totally traumatised by it. Whatever the wall of secrecy - she can't deal

with it'. He now meets with her on a regular basis and they talk on the phone every week or two. They go to the theatre together and he has visited her at Christmas.

This next woman was born into a home in the early 1970s, was adopted and had 'always' wanted to meet her birthmother. Fate took a hand in the process when, unexpectedly, she got a letter from one of the nuns in the home where her mother gave birth to her. The letter said, as follows:

Your mother wants to meet you but it wouldn't be a good idea as she is profoundly retarded. She lives in sheltered accommodation and a carer lives with her.

This nun continued by telling the witness that her birthmother had also given birth to a baby boy and had *drowned him in a bath*. *Don't give her your address*, the letter concluded, *she'll be pestering you for the rest of your life and you'll have to look after her and she never looked after you*.

The witness ignored the advice and wrote to her mother. They 'exchanged letters for about a year', then they met, whereupon the witness found: Her mother was not retarded. She was not living in sheltered accommodation with a carer. She was living with her partner. The baby boy had not been drowned in a bath but had died of a kidney disease. The witness's mother died a year and a half after they met.

A witness, trying to find his mother, commenced formal tracing in 2006 and discovered, through the Adopted Persons Register that he had a brother. He said to the Committee that he has issues about how this register works: 'If I hadn't contacted them to see if there were any hits, I wouldn't have been told about my brother. I am very grateful to the person that pieced it together. I was told that the register is not designed for siblings to meet. People should know that'.

When she turned 18 years, this adoptee, born in a home in the mid-1970s discovered during her efforts at tracing that her birthmother had herself been born 'out of wedlock' and placed in state care until she was 17 years old. This witness found her attempts to access her files and her own birth certificate to be 'a very negative experience'. She was told by a relevant authority that it would take three years before she would be

allocated a social worker, but was given 'non-identifying details' on the proviso that she 'would not undertake any private investigations'. Then she was given 'a blank A4 sheet out of a printer' to this effect and signed it.

In continuing her efforts, she met a nun who had known her mother; this nun told her that her mother had 'gone to live in Germany and had a happy life'. However, when she did obtain the files she found that this account was at odds with what was written in them. In addition, she became angry about the way these notes about her mother had been written - citing, for example, 'the suggestion that as a teenager, her mother had been 'man mad'.

To continue her quest, this witness had to 'go before a board of people' which she found 'traumatising, it was numerous social workers versus me', during which she was told that her own file was 'very traumatic'. Plus, she said to the Committee, she was told she would be 'allowed' to have her original birth certificate only if they could 'ensure that she was sound of mind'. This witness never met her birthmother. She discovered that two of her siblings had died when they were babies but no-one can tell her where they are buried. She has been met with 'a wall of silence' she said, and 'there are no hospital records'.

This next witness, whose child was adopted in the mid-1980s, spent time in a home before giving birth to a daughter. She began the tracing of her child quite early on but at the time of coming to speak to the Confidential Committee, has yet to meet her. At the outset, a social worker told her that she had: 'no entitlement' to meet her daughter; that 'her daughter would not like her', that 'making contact could take years', and that she had 'no rights'. Despite all this, however, to the witness's delight, a meeting was eventually arranged - but her daughter 'cancelled at the last minute', writing to the witness that she was 'not ready'. They kept in contact by letter for a while, but that 'petered away'.

The witness then discovered that her letters to her daughter were being 'scanned for appropriateness' before being passed on by the adoption agency. 'We had to vet them', was the word used when she found out that the letters not deemed to be 'appropriate', had not been sent on. She was told she was 'heaping' too much on her daughter. She was 'distracted', about all of this, she told the Committee, because her letters had 'explained everything'. 'I had been obsessed for almost 30 years', she said, 'but in the past year I've let it go. For myself, I had to get over it, what will be will be'.

Coming immediately after the last story, this one is a counterbalance. Just as the experience of the woman above illustrated the wish of a mother who had been separated from her child to re-connect, this man's story also illustrates the wish of a child to know his mother, not just that but the desire to know who he is: 'You couldn't know where you were going if you didn't know where you came from'. Walking down the street, he said to the Committee, 'he would think: *Any one of these people could be related to me*'.

Born in the early 1980s and then adopted, this witness began to trace his mother when he was in his 20s, acknowledging that his adoptive parents were 'very supportive' of the endeavour. He, unlike some others, also said that he had found the agency he went to 'very helpful', although he did add: 'I can imagine, if I couldn't get information, how frustrating that would be! The not knowing'.

The process, he said, had been explained to him, along with the possibility of a time delay: 'It's not a simple process where you can just open records'. He was lucky, his mother had registered soon after he had turned 18 years of age and a match was soon found. But after this success, he said to the Committee that he 'had been hoping for a deal that would include time to settle and register what was happening' and that happened, with letters and photographs exchanged until, finally, he and his mother started to phone each other.

They met at the agency premises. He found this first meeting 'very natural' and described his mother as 'warm' but said he still struggles with the notion of her being only 16 years old when she became pregnant with him: 'I can't get it out of my head that she was so young'.

He had worried, initially, that by conducting the search for his birthmother, his actions could be perceived as him 'not considering myself as part of my adoptive family, but I'm not looking for another mother'. He said, speaking about his own sense of relief: 'I never felt I had a bloodline, that was a hurdle I had to cross. Meeting my mother helped, otherwise I had felt I was floating', adding the experience meant he could call the place where he lived, 'home'.

His birth and adoptive mothers have met each other and he greatly appreciates that the former 'doesn't have a sense of entitlement to meet me. She handed me over in

good faith that my adoptive mother is now my mother. 'It was a healing process for her, I think, she would die a sad woman if she'd never met me'.

Laden on top of this very positive experience, though, was the meeting he had later with his birthfather, facilitated by his birthmother. They met in 2012, when the witness discovered, sadly, that his father suffers from depression and addiction. He also went on to meet his half-brother, 'also difficult', he said, because up to then, this half-brother had had no idea about the witness's existence. He keeps contact, however, with this newly discovered birth family, feeling that he has a 'moral duty' to those who had given birth to him.

Having given birth to her in a home, a witness gave her daughter for adoption in the late 1980s and later made contact with her through the adoption agency. The contact began as was customary, with an exchange of letters and photographs. When they met, they discovered that the witness's daughter had been in the same class in school as her cousins; and that the gift brought by the witness to give to her daughter to mark their first meeting, had been purchased in the shop where her child's adoptive mother worked.

In some cases, having successfully traced each other, a mother and the child she had given for adoption did not, or could not, maintain their relationship. At nine years old, this witness's daughter wrote to her through a social worker, leading to an exchange of cards and gifts. They met in 2008 and kept contact for a while - but then her daughter moved abroad and following a visit home in 2016, cut all ties on a *don't call me, I'll call you* basis. 'I have loved this child for 35 years', said the witness to the Confidential Committee: 'It was like getting your heart broken all over again'.

'He sat in my kitchen so many times and lied to me', a witness said of a priest who had told her that the family who had adopted her daughter had emigrated to the US. They hadn't, and having successfully traced this daughter, they haven't yet met. The witness told the Committee that quite separately, her daughter's adoptive brother, having also been traced, had held 'an unsuccessful meeting' with his birthmother and she believes that this has engendered wariness in her daughter about meeting her. At

the time of telling her story to the Committee, this mother and daughter were 'exchanging Christmas and birthday cards'.

This next mother, bent on tracing her adopted son, told the Committee that the nun she approached looking for information, wanted to 'interview' her first. 'I had to play a game and be a good girl' to get information on my child. It took everything in me not to slam the nun against the wall!

Before a birth mother traced her child she said that: 'the only life I could give her was a life undisturbed...' The witness said that her attempts to trace her daughter had been frustrated by letters not being passed on and she had gave up. But later, this daughter (who had waited, until after her adoptive mother had died) reversed the process and traced her. Mother and daughter found each other and are now 'strongly bonded' and meeting regularly: 'I was very aware when she came to meet me, she didn't know me from Adam, and I'd loved her all my life'.

This next witness featured in an earlier section when she came to the Committee to tell of her fostering with an elderly couple during which she endured a life of 'extreme' abuse. When she was 35 years old she met her mother once again, her siblings too and went on to write a book about her childhood and experiences. 'But', she told the Committee, her siblings were not happy about this book. Her parents, she also discovered, had married after the witness's birth (and had gone on to have nine more children.)

This next witness was adopted to the USA in 1951 and ever since her early 20s has been trying to trace her records, as her adoptive parents had destroyed any records they held. In 2013, the witness undertook tracing research when on a visit to Ireland and went to the home in which her birthmother had been born and was given access to her birth records by the nuns there. However, when she returned to Ireland in 2015 and again went to the home, she found that the files they had been holding were now missing a 'significant number of documents' and when she enquired as to where they were, she told the Committee that 'the nun avoided answering her questions'.

This next witness overcame all the obstacles thrown in his tracing path using determination, persistence, and the odd white lie. He was taken to a home, with his mother, having been born in 1949 and was later fostered at four and a half, having also spent a year and a half in another home. This witness told the Committee that he

'always had had concerns about his identity'. As soon as his own son was born, he felt 'compelled' to begin the process of tracing his birthmother. He managed to get his 'long form' birth certificate in 2001, but it took a further year to find his baptismal cert. He then decided he would 'put things off due to the stigma attached to it all'.

He took up the search again in 2011 and following fruitless enquiries with various organisations, was eventually allocated a social worker, who began the process of liaising with the relevant bodies. During this process, he said to the Committee, he was 'asked a lot of questions that would discourage you from trying to trace' but was determined to keep going, and did - and in time, arrangements were made for him to meet his seven half-siblings, none of whom had known anything at all about him, nor he about them. He also discovered that the documents he was getting 'contained specific inaccuracies' which, he believes, were deliberate attempts 'to frustrate tracing, and' he said, 'he had had to lie' to access his own records. In 2012, his social worker organised a meeting with his birthmother, who, up to then, had continued to protest that she was *not* his mother. 'However', he said, 'the minute they met, she admitted to everything', which was a 'huge relief' to him - and now they have an 'ongoing close relationship'.

When this next witness, born in a home in 1956, turned 21 years of age, her adoptive parents passed on to her all the information they had been given about her background when they adopted her. This triggered a desire to trace her birth parents and her husband said he would help her; he had heard a radio programme about a specialist agency in this field and had noted its details. It transpired, though, when they started the process, that her adoptive parents had been 'lied to' about her background, with the nuns giving them 'incorrect information', so when the witness got her birth cert, she was shocked to discover she had been searching in the wrong geographical area.

By the early 1990s, she had been assigned a new social worker who was successful in tracing a niece of the witness. This niece revealed the whereabouts of the witness's mother and in due time, this mother contacted the agency. When they met, the witness discovered that the information about her birthfather had also been incorrect, this, she figured, was because of his ethnicity, reasoning that his background could have (in the opinion of the nuns at the time), hindered her prospects of adoption. As the years passed, the witness eventually met everyone in her extended family and continues to have a 'strong' relationship with her mother.

The Committee heard from a witness who went to a social worker and was given one of two files held, while informing her that despite previously having been told that her mother had died in childbirth, she was alive. This social worker then left the other file open so that the witness could read a letter that her mother had written to her, telling her 'how heartbroken she had been to leave her' and how 'she hoped that she (the witness) was happy'. In 1991/92 this witness wrote to her birthmother via the social worker but in her reply, her mother said 'she would rather die' than have her husband find out about the witness's existence.

Time can work in your favour and this happened for this witness. Later, she discovered that her birthmother's husband had died and initiated contact by phoning her to sympathise. She also managed to contact her half-siblings through internet searches. In consequence of all this, 'a family gathering' was organised for 'all to meet stateside' her mother and family live in the USA. The witness has now been 'welcomed into this family'.

'Maybe you make decisions at significant moments in your life', said a woman who had been born in a home in 1957 - and who had decided to start her tracing journey just after her 40th birthday. The tracing worked but the relationship stuttered after a few 'pleasant' meetings' because of the witness's birthmother's 'obsession with secrecy'.

The tracing experience was equally fraught for this next witness, born in a home in 1959 and whose upbringing with her adoptive parents was 'very traumatic', to the extent that she ended up in a Magdalen laundry at the age of 14. Her initial attempts to trace her birth family via contacts with the nuns in the home, went nowhere, and it was a priest who ended up arranging for her to meet her birthmother. This mother had divulged that she and the birthfather of the witness had married; they had had six more children together, none knowing of the witness's existence.

The news did break within the birth family and the witness told the Committee that she 'had been blamed for the breach of secrecy', despite her insistence that she had not been the one to perpetrate this; in any case, the entire family rejected her. She was now, she said, in 'complete estrangement' from her family. To rub salt into the wound, she went on to discover that she had, unknowingly, grown up living very close to this birth family. She said that (other than from that priest who had made the first contact)

she had had 'total lack of support' around it and feels that 'some form of counselling' might have helped the situation, because, 'the difficulties persist', she said.

They persist too in the situation involving a witness who, born in a home in 1961, 'had always wanted to trace and meet' her birthmother and to that end, contacted the nun who had been involved in arranging her adoption. This nun had remained in 'good' contact with her adoptive family. It was she who, like the witness above, along with a priest who was a friend of the birthmother's family, organised the first meeting between the witness and her birthmother.

However, the birthmother did not show up, explaining later that since she had not told her family about the witness, due to 'other family commitments' at the time of the meeting, she had been 'unable to get away'. The witness told the Committee that she had been 'extremely upset' by this no-show as it had made her feel that she was being 'rejected all over again'.

A further meeting was arranged, this time in the birthmother's family home, but it was less than satisfactory. The witness was disappointed to find her birthmother asking her to pose as her cousin, 'should any of the family return home'. It was a short meeting', she said, adding that while her birthmother, 'did seem eager to keep in touch', the witness herself soon became 'heavily involved' in caring for her adoptive mother and thereby lost contact, although she did speak with her half-brother over the phone. They had not yet met as of the time of her interview with the Committee. As for her birthmother: 'We just weren't meant to be, in this life'.

Secrecy is a feature of this next story too. This witness (born in a home in 1962) was 45 years old when he first met his birthmother after a 'couple of attempts' to trace her, rendered 'difficult' because he had no birth certificate. After that first meeting, he told the Confidential Committee, they met again but 'only three or four times', and there hasn't been any contact 'in many years'.

The authorities cannot be blamed in this case because it is the witness himself who has broken contact. His own children, he said, were unaware he had been adopted, and he wanted to keep that from them, feeling it is still 'a taboo subject' and he doesn't want to burden them with any stress, such as that he experienced, growing up. 'I'll take this to the grave with me', he said to the Committee, 'not to shatter their lives'.

Born in 1963 in state care, the witness gave birth to a son in a home. When she made contact with him for the first time many years later, she discovered that he had had a difficult life with an adoptive mother who was an alcoholic, and had received only a 'poor' education. Her son was suspicious of her motives in contacting him, she told the Committee, believing she could be looking for organ donation.

This witness was born in the UK in 1959, but later spent time with his mother in a mother and baby home in Ireland in 1965, from where he was taken to be raised in state and foster care. He told the Committee that she had wanted to keep him with his two younger brothers, but alleges that all three were 'wrongly removed' from her through a Court petition claiming she was 'an addict'. (He said she did suffer from alcoholism but only after her children had been removed from her and she had moved back to the UK.) When he was eight years old, he was told she had died. His birthfather was from a distant country.

This witness said that he has 'always' been seeking to find information about his background. When he sought records from the home in 1980, he was told that all records had been 'lost or destroyed'. However, he told the Committee, when a TV company became interested in covering his search, its researchers had managed, in a short space of time, to access more information than he had in 30 years. Contact was eventually made with his stepfather's family in the UK, and he learned that this stepfather had attempted to have him and his two brothers brought back to the UK, but that the application had been 'denied by the authorities'.

A witness, born in a home in 1965, told the Committee that he 'lost 23 years' when his birthmother could have been in (his) life', but she wasn't. To find her, he had gone back to the home seeking records and information but was told they 'had nothing'. It wasn't until he became 'very ill,' that a social worker was able to trace his mother and they finally met in 1999. She has since died. However, he said to the Committee, he was 'hidden even in death, not acknowledged at her funeral'.

This next woman had a son in a home in 1966. She told the Confidential Committee that she had 'always' wanted to find him but felt for many years that 'because (she) had signed a piece of paper saying (she) would never look for him, was

bound by that'. Notwithstanding, she had 'left messages for him' all over adoption boards. When she knew he had turned 18 years of age, she registered with an adoption agency saying she wanted to meet him. This adoption agency turned out to be the same agency he registered with when in his 30s, saying he wanted to meet her. They were not matched.

The son then found his mother on Facebook and sent her a message - but the witness didn't notice the message for over a year. She then replied to his message but for some reason, he couldn't receive it. They were eventually matched through this adoption agency, had their first meeting there, and thereafter, continued to meet privately, their relationship going 'from strength to strength'. 'The only drawback', she said to the Committee, was that her husband 'refuses to discuss the matter' so 'I have to hide our meetings from him'.

Another witness who had her son in a home in 1967 began to trace him in the year 2000. When, as so many others had found, she was thwarted in her searches and requests for files and information, she went to an Irish minister and also to 'some other politicians'. In 2013, she rang the relevant state agency, again requested her files, and was told 'it would take eight years'. She then went to the European Parliament to speak about her experience.

Along the way, she had been told by a social worker that 'all the files were in a shed' (in a named village) and that 'there could be vermin eating through the boxes' and that in any case, 'they didn't have the resources to go through the files'.

For the next six months, the witness told the Committee, she phoned this social worker's office 'every Tuesday and Thursday' looking for her records - and kept calling until a match was found. It was only then she discovered that in parallel, her son had been battling for nine years with another, bigger, state entity to get his files. 'They have an incredible knack of keeping you apart for as long as possible', this mother said. Files found on all sides, the witness and her son then wrote to each other for about six weeks, 'exchanging information' before finally meeting later that year of 2013. They have an ongoing relationship.

A witness who was born in a home in 1968 and who had 'a very happy adoption', came to the Committee outlining a very different experience. Having contacted a register in the pursuit of her medical information because one of her children was having 'health issues', she was 'overwhelmed' with the amount of information she was given by a nun, who had asked her to come and talk to her because she would be 'closing all the files'.

When they met, the witness discovered that her birthmother had died very recently. This nun then proceeding to relay *all* the background information in the files, (despite the witness having requested *only* what was relevant medically to help her child.) The witness, who clearly hadn't known very much about her mother's background, found the depth and detail of what she was being told 'overwhelming and inappropriate' with everything she had been told previously about her own identity 'changed within minutes'.

The social worker, contacting her afterwards to find out how she had got on, was 'shocked' to hear about the way she had been given all this information. This social worker then instantly assigned a (dedicated) social worker to help her. She told the Committee that she has been 'deeply affected' by the whole process, and 'the more she delves into the past, the uglier it gets'.

Once she started tracing her son (she gave birth to him in a home in 1970) this next mother didn't have too much difficulty with the tracing process itself, but once she and her son met, she found it tricky to negotiate those waters; 'there are boundaries that need to be respected around adoption and there is little guidance or expertise in this area'. She had held off on the tracing process until her own birthmother had died: 'My parents carried grief about what they did to me, having me give my son away...'

She and her son finally met in 2006, and following that meeting, she did a course with a specialist agency, telling the Committee that she had met 'some lovely women there who helped me to open up'. She continues to meet her son 'a few times a year' but said: 'It's very hard for a birthmother to get it right. You're trying to make up for lost years but you don't want to overwhelm them. I don't know if adoptees can fully trust their birthmothers, there is a whole area of sensitivity'. For instance, when she tried to explain to her son that she hadn't wanted to give him up, 'he totally withdrew and was unable to cope with that information'. 'It's much more complex than I thought it would be'.

A woman who had a son in a home in 1971 told the Committee that she began tracing in 2011 with the help of a social worker. However, it transpired that her son did not want to meet her at that time. Then, about five years later, she received a call from him and they now meet up 'about once a year'. She said that his adoptive family is 'secretive' about the fact that he is an adoptee and she struggles with this, and also with the fact that her son calls them 'Mum' and 'Dad'. She does recognise, though, that 'they are lovely people'.

Like many other witnesses who spoke to the Committee about the frustration involved in searching for records and files, this witness, who gave birth to her daughter in 1973, said when she travelled back to the home to request the paperwork, 'it was like somebody had come along with a black marker and erased everything'.

She told the Committee that her daughter had been adopted to the USA, but as far as the witness knew, there hadn't been any attempt on that side to start a trace. As for her, while not opposed to the tracing process itself, she had already got 'so much grief' from her family due to her pregnancy, she hasn't done it.

Another witness who did begin the process of tracing had had a daughter in 1976. Her husband had encouraged her to search for her daughter and she went along to a counselling session run by a specialist group. However, she told the Committee, she had been unable to stay for the full group session as she 'didn't want to hear their stories, it was too sad and it did me no good'.

Only a few months after putting her name on the register in 2006, the witness received a phone call from an agency to say that contact had been made with her daughter. The witness wrote to her and then told her other two daughters (from her marriage) that they had a half-sister. 'They were very shocked'.

Birthmother and daughter exchanged photos; and she told the Committee that when writing a letter, she would 'check the dictionary to make sure everything was correct'. She didn't want to 'rush' her daughter, she said, for fear of 'losing her again'. They met in the agency offices. The agency personnel had instructed her: 'not to cry, not to hug, not to bring gifts'. But her daughter had brought a gift for her. They hugged. They were 'immediately comfortable' with one another and chatted for a few hours. They now continue to meet regularly, although the witness told the Committee that she 'never puts pressure on her daughter to meet'.

This next witness said that from the beginning, she said, she had been open to her son tracing her, and would regularly update her contact details held by the relevant adoption agency. The agency rang her one day to tell her that her son, now aged 22 years, had been in touch and wanted to meet her. The witness immediately travelled to meet him. Neither she nor her son had had any counselling prior to this meeting, she told the Committee, and during that first encounter she was careful, keeping in mind that while she was 'hoping for a relationship with him, his adoptive mother was now his mother'.

They met again sometime later, but this time she worried about him, feeling he might be suffering 'some kind of a breakdown'. Afterwards, she phoned the adoption agency, expressing her concerns and asking the nun there to 'look into it'. This nun, she said, 'went directly to the adoptive parents, telling them that the witness 'had concerns that their son was on drugs'. Naturally, the parents told him and after this, he sent her an email saying he 'wanted nothing more to do with me'. Since then, the only contact she has had with him, is to send 'the odd card at Christmas or on birthdays'.

Acknowledgment

As seen above, some witnesses did acknowledge to the Committee that over the years, improvements had been made to the conditions pregnant women had to face in the homes but up to the latter decades of the 20th century, the lifting of cultural disdain for 'fallen' women and their 'bastard' offspring - and acceptance of them as full members of society - was slow to gain widespread currency.

There were mothers who told the Committee that over the years they had managed to bury the experience of their younger lives by strength of will, many within the UK to which they had re-located. They reported how they had made a success of their lives, post-mother and baby home, having put their earlier experiences to one side.

For all kinds of personal and public reasons, some witnesses still felt it was necessary to tell their stories, sometimes against their own families who, petrified by shame, mortification, fear of parish scandal and neighbours' blame, had jettisoned them at a time when help and solidarity were most needed.

However, in all groups, the depth and honesty of what witnesses revealed to the Committee about what had happened to them having left the mother and baby homes, was startling. To tell these stories and have them noted by the Irish state, took courage, and of that there was plenty.

The Committee is very grateful to all those who came forward to tell of their experience in the mother and baby homes. For some it was the first time they had revealed their feelings and thoughts of their time there. The Committee wishes to acknowledge how difficult that was for them.

Thank you.