



Main points of Mother & Baby Commission of Investigation Report as they relate to local authorities

**Sub-title: “The women in County Council County Homes have been largely
forgotten.”**

Liam Kenny, MA, Director, AILG



Introduction

The Mother & Baby Commission of Investigation Final Report published is a voluminous work which has a number of implications for local authorities.

In preparing this summary of the relevant sections of the report I have surveyed the report as a whole and read in detail of its 84 sections dealing specifically with County Council County Homes; the 267 paragraphs of the Executive Summary; and the 53 individual recommendations.

While much of the media attention has been focused on two or three institutions that have by now acquired notoriety – principally Tuam and Bessboro’ - it comes as a revelation that the professional authors’ most excoriating criticism is reserved for the County Homes – homes which were run, staffed, managed and financed entirely by the County Councils.

The personnel involved were not – contrary to the media narrative - from religious orders but were all lay people – Councillors, County Managers and secular staff – matrons, nurses, and porters. While the circumstances in the likes of religious run institutions at Bessboro, Sean Ross and Castlepollard were far from proper the report shows that they were of a consistently higher standard as compared to the County Homes where words like “appalling”, “primitive” and “revolting” are used to describe conditions.

Perhaps the most inexcusable conclusion is that these conditions were well known at the time to Councillors and to Council Management. Indeed, they were documented in reports made by the Dept. of Local Government and Public Health Inspectors and yet nothing was done – and in some cases the manifest truth of the inspector’s reports was contested by council officials.

The elected members were not exempt from this ignorance of the true conditions in homes. In every case Councillors were members of the board of health, the council committee with first-hand knowledge of the administration of the homes. Such committees held meetings in the County Homes where councillors were also members of visiting committees. However it is questionable whether these committees ever fulfilled their duty of visiting and reporting on conditions.

It is notable that while local authority minute books contain columns relating to debates on decisions on tarring roads or draining rivers there is almost no mention of issues relating to county homes other than cursory mention of financial matters.

The County Homes were subject to a form of inspection and most of the knowledge of their conditions is drawn from the inspector's reports – generally a Miss Litster who was inspector for many years. However ever despite the direct nature of her reports they seem not to have been taken seriously by the County Councils. The change in name from Workhouse to County Home in 1922 was all but meaningless with workhouse conditions prevailing as late as the 1950s.

Commission's Recommendations

Specifically among its recommendations it notes that local authorities should contribute under the following headings:

- a) **Memorialisation** – local authorities should be able to provide funding for memorialisation projects in consultation with survivors of their local county homes.

(This writer would suggest that such memorialisation projects could be imaginative and not confined to stone plaques or monuments. Consideration could be given to, for example, a wild garden encouraging pollination, or to a bursary to an artist be it in the visual or the performing arts to create a memorial piece or performance, or given the degree to which archives enabled the report, a grant awarded to a student to carry out a study of the county home in its specific local context.)

- b) **Archives** - local authorities should fulfil their obligations under the Local Government Acts and make their records relating to their running of county homes available to the public subject to withholding or redaction where this is provided for in the legislation. This will require local authorities to employ professional archivists to help make records ready for consultation.

Other consequences for today's local authorities

Although not specifically referred to in the report's recommendations, the following issues may result in the aftermath to the report which will unfold in the coming months:

Redress – there will inevitably be a publicly-funded redress scheme. It is presumed that such a scheme would be led by national government and would cover the liabilities of local authorities. However it is possible that funding due to local authorities could be drawn upon to fund such a redress scheme. There is also the possibility that some of the survivors of the county homes would take independent legal action against the county councils.

Reputational damage – while the issues being reported may seem well in the past the excoriating nature of the report's findings against County Council run County Homes will not do anything for the reputation of local authorities past or present. As this controversy will be subjected to repeated coverage on local newspaper and radio outlets in the coming months the public will only hear the

words “County Council” and at least some of the opprobrium may attach to the present bearer of that name.

Working classification of institutions – County Homes and others

There are two broad classifications of institutions where mothers and babies were accommodated:

- County homes – former workhouses which post 1922 were used to accommodate the elderly, those with disabilities, abandoned children, and mothers-and-babies. Almost every county had such a home with, in addition, three counties having dedicated homes for mothers-and-babies: Galway, Tuam; Clare – Kilrush and County Dublin - Pelletstown.
- Special or external homes which were run independently of local authorities generally by religious. These would include Bessboro’, Sean Ross, Castlepollard, as well as the lay run Bethany Home for the Protestant community.

In virtually all cases the women were funded by the County Council from which they originated.

The point of difference is that the local authority was directly responsible for the welfare of the occupants of the County Homes.

The following material paraphrases the cited sections in the report.

Overview of conditions in County Homes

From an early stage in the report, and right through, it is clear that the County Homes had particularly appalling standards of provision for the mothers-and-babies accommodated therein.

Mother and baby homes were greatly superior to the county homes where, until the 1960s, many unmarried mothers and their children were resident.¹

Some of the institutions were in very poor physical condition. Living conditions in domestic Irish homes generally were generally poor before the 1960s with a lack of piped water, sanitation and electricity; however, poor sanitary conditions in congregated settings have much more serious consequences than in individual homes. County Homes, as well as Kilrush and Tuam, had appalling physical conditions. Conditions in the other mother and baby homes (i.e: non-Council run) were considerably better and improved over time; in particular, conditions in Dunboyne were very good.²

¹ Par. 14 Executive Summary Final Report of the Commission of Investigation for Mother and Baby Homes 2021

² Par. 18 Do.

The women in county homes have been largely forgotten³

Conditions in the county homes were generally very poor; this, of course, was also true for the other residents who were mainly older people and people with disabilities. The women in county homes have been largely forgotten. They included women on a second or subsequent pregnancy and women from the poorest families. County homes admitted women with special needs, mental health problems, venereal disease or a criminal conviction, who would be rejected by a number of mother and baby homes. They also accommodated children who had special needs, including the children of married families. The accommodation and care given to these children in county homes was grossly inadequate; some of the descriptions were described as being extremely distressing.

“ The local authority held regular meetings in the home ... ”⁴

When the Children’s Home was in Glenamaddy the Bon Secours Sisters who ran the home were salaried local authority employees; the Sisters had previously run the Glenamaddy workhouse on a similar basis. When the Children’s Home relocated to Tuam the Sisters were no longer treated as local authority employees and they did not receive a salary. Staff in Tuam were recruited and paid by the Sisters, from the capitation payment that they received from the Galway and Mayo local authorities, though much of the work was carried out unpaid by the mothers. The Galway local authority held regular meetings in the Children’s Home; however, it is unclear whether these were used to conduct inspections. The Superior in Tuam kept the county manager informed about the women and children in the home, and he was involved in making decisions about their future, including specifying that some women should be sent to a Magdalen laundry.

Infant mortality: ‘The high level of infant mortality did not feature at meetings of Galway County Council’⁵

Although the first report of the registrar general of the Irish Free State highlighted the appalling excess mortality of children born to unmarried mothers and subsequent Dept. of Local Government and Public Health reports noted the fact, there is little evidence that politicians or the public were concerned about these children. No publicity was given to the fact that in some years during the 1930s and 1940s, over 40% of ‘illegitimate’ children were dying before their first birthday in mother and baby homes.

The high level of infant mortality in the Tuam Children’s Home did not feature at meetings of Galway county council, though Tuam was under the control of the local authority and it held meetings in the Children’s Home.

There could have been in a different approach. In Birmingham even when the city was under attack during the second world war, the local authority introduced targeted measures to reduce infant mortality among ‘illegitimate’ infants and the death rate fell below the average for all infants in the

³ Par. 18 Do.

⁴ Par 23 Do.

⁵ Par 47. do

municipality. But such action required public acknowledgement that these children existed and a commitment to promoting their well-being.

There is little evidence of similar concerns within Irish society; the children of Irish unmarried mothers were hidden from the public gaze. Infant mortality in general remained high in Ireland until the late 1940s, especially in the inner cities, yet there was no national outcry about this, except among a small number of medical professionals.

County Councils excluded unmarried mothers from County Hospitals⁶

Maternity units were added to mother and baby homes because unmarried mothers were not welcome in county hospitals. Galway County Council determined that unmarried mothers should be excluded from the Central Hospital in Galway because their presence deterred 'respectable' married women from giving birth in the hospital. Unmarried mothers in Kilkenny were excluded from the county hospital and sent, regardless of distance, to give birth in the county home in Thomastown. However the Dublin maternity hospitals admitted unmarried women and appear to have given them similar care to married mothers.

Cork County Council – County Home: “Women ate their meals squatting on the floor”⁷

In the 1920s the living conditions in, for example, the Cork County Home were appalling. In 1921 the women ate their meals squatting on the floor. Most heating was by open fire. The food was often adulterated or unfit for consumption. Milk was watered and meat was of poor quality. No major improvements were carried out until the 1950s.

There are several reports of unmarried mothers being assaulted by 'inmates' who were drunk or suffering from mental illness. One woman, who had given birth to two babies, became pregnant apparently by a male 'inmate'; she was sent to a Magdalen laundry. A number of women 'absconded' leaving their baby behind; although the Gardaí were contacted, they do not appear to have returned the mothers.

‘Bad and rather revolting’ – sanitary conditions in Donegal County Council County Home⁸

The conditions in the Donegal County Council home in Stranolar were very poor. Water and sanitary services were inadequate with only two flush toilets. Most residents had to use outdoor toilets that were described as 'bad and rather revolting'. There was no hot water in the operating theatre. Given these conditions it is not surprising that there were several outbreaks of typhoid. The diet was dominated by bread and tea, but the Minister for Local Government determined that it was too

⁶ Par 61 do

⁷ Par 155, do.

⁸ Par 158, do.

generous and the county home was informed that residents should receive three meals a day not four.

In 1935 the local medical officer discontinued admissions to the labour ward because it lacked a bathroom and running water. An inspection in the 1940s reported that there were no facilities to bathe children and arrangements for washing and drying clothing were poor. During the day children spent much of their time in a 'hut'. The first major improvements commenced in 1949. They included installing washing and sanitary facilities in the children's ward and a wash-hand basin in the labour ward.⁹

Mothers banned from seeing their children – Donegal County Council County Home¹⁰

Most of the work was carried out by the unmarried mothers, who were unpaid. The mothers of older children lived and slept in the main section of the county home and they could only see their children on Sundays; the administration believed that more frequent visits disrupted the routine and upset the children. In 1954 when plans were being drawn up to remove unmarried mothers and children from the county home, the matron objected that she would be unable to find replacement workers.¹¹

A total of 343 'illegitimate' children who were in Stranorlar died in infancy or early childhood. The death rate peaked in 1930 with an infant mortality rate of 42%; deaths were also high in the 1940s. Over 60% of deaths were attributed to pneumonia or bronchitis.

"No sanitary equipment in the labour ward" – Kilkenny County Council County Home¹²

There were no significant improvements for several decades. In 1946 there were only eight baths, 16 WC and 16 wash-hand basins for 250 men, women and children and the baths seldom had hot water. All the laundry was done by hand; there were no disinfecting facilities and there were no electric sockets, no heating and no sanitary equipment in the labour ward. In 1949 the Department of Health decided to defer installing central heating, in order to give priority to county hospitals and sanatoria.

Child deaths: 177 'illegitimate' children who were in Thomastown died in infancy or early childhood; 54% of the mothers who were in Thomastown experienced the death of at least one child; more than a quarter of these deaths happened outside the county home.

Most of the older children had been placed at nurse by their mothers and were sent to the county home when payments ceased or the lump sum was exhausted; some of the nurse children who were admitted had broken bones. A DLGPH inspector described others as 'dying from neglect'.

⁹ Par. 159 do.

¹⁰ Par 160 do.

¹¹ Par 160 do.

¹² Par 163 do.

Local authorities responsible for the vast majority of women in all homes

The overwhelming majority of women in mother and baby homes were maintained by their local authority and they had to secure prior approval from the local authority before they were admitted.

¹³

Securing the sanction of a local authority to pay for her upkeep required that a woman or somebody acting on her behalf would contact local officials. Given the secrecy that surrounded the pregnancies of single women, and the low levels of mass education in Ireland at the time, many women or their families may not have known how to do this. There were no advice centres at this time. It was only at the end of the 1960s that the Department of Health approved a short leaflet informing pregnant single women where they could seek assistance.¹⁴

County Manager makes intrusive enquiry as to where child had been conceived¹⁵

In the 1940s and 1950s, if a woman had fled to England and had been repatriated, or had been working in Dublin, she might face difficulties in securing financial support from the local authority where she had formerly lived.

County managers often disputed whether a particular woman should be maintained; local authorities disputed her address, how long she had been absent from the country. One of the most intrusive queries asked whether the infant had been conceived in county Kilkenny or in Laois.

Some local authorities carried out intrusive investigations into a woman's circumstances - or more specifically whether her family could afford to contribute to the cost of her maintenance in a mother and baby home. These investigations could seriously jeopardise her privacy, perhaps making her pregnancy known, not just to her immediate family but more widely.

“Some evidence that able-bodied women ... were allocated the worst accommodation.”¹⁶

Conditions in the county homes were much worse than in any mother and baby home, with the exceptions of Kilrush and Tuam. In the mid-1920s most had no sanitation, perhaps no running water; heating, where available was by an open fire; food was cooked, badly, often in a different building, so it was cold and even more unpalatable when it reached the women.

Many county homes had no place for children to play or space for the women to sit. In 1933 the women in the Waterford county home had to eat their meals in the dormitory.

There is some evidence that the able-bodied women, who were mainly unmarried mothers, were allocated the worst accommodation, because they were not seen as 'deserving' unlike the elderly and infirm, and their quarters were the last to be improved. Improvements were carried out to mother and baby homes in the 1920s and 1930s, but there is no evidence of significant investment in county homes during these years - other than installing electric lights, and perhaps connecting the home to a town's water and sewerage system.

¹³ Par 167 do

¹⁴ Par 168 do

¹⁵ Par 169 do

¹⁶ Par 218, do.

Most county homes continued to lack adequate sanitary facilities, running water, hot water on tap and heating other than open fires until the 1950s - sometimes the end of that decade.

Women exploited as unpaid labour in County Council County Homes¹⁷

The workload for the women in county homes was of a different magnitude to the mother and baby homes. Unmarried mothers were far outnumbered by children, including older children, and by elderly and incapacitated adults.

Most county homes did not employ domestic staff so unmarried women were assigned onerous duties that were essential to the running of these homes. There are many contemporary statements by local officials or matrons insisting that unmarried mothers could not be removed from the county home, because there would be nobody to carry out this work.

A lack of hot water and sanitary facilities, the old, dilapidated buildings, with stone staircases and corridors, made their work even more difficult and unpleasant.

County homes accommodated adults and children with special needs who would have required extra assistance and personal care. Women continued to carry out unpaid work in some county homes until the early 1960s, despite a statement by the Minister of Health in 1952 that this was prohibited.

Council official “rewarded” for interrogating women¹⁸

10.8 In the 1920s a pregnant woman or mother of a new-born infant who sought admittance to the Dublin Union was interrogated by the porter about her circumstances, including the identity of the putative father of her child.

In the Donegal county home in Stranorlar the storekeeper was rewarded for investigating the personal circumstances of unmarried mothers and eliciting payments towards the maintenance of mother and child from either a putative father or her family.¹⁰ Some of the women admitted to special mother and baby homes were subject to similar inquisitions by their local authority.

Councils refused to send women to mother-and-baby homes to save money

Local authorities had absolute discretion over whether they would pay for a mother and her child in a special mother and baby home. Women had no statutory entitlement to maintenance in a special home, and the files reveal some unseemly wrangles between different local authorities as to who was financially responsible for her maintenance. Some local authorities refused to send any women to special mother and baby homes, despite being repeatedly urged to do so by the DLGPH.¹⁹

¹⁷ Par 226, do.

¹⁸ Par 10.8 Chapter 10 “County Homes”, Final Report Commission of Inquiry into Mother-and-Baby Homes, 2021

¹⁹ Section 10.11, do.

In 1940, the department inspector Miss Litster reported that counties Kerry, Limerick, Roscommon, Louth and Wicklow refused to send any women to mother and baby homes 'except by special arrangement'. Women in Mayo and Galway were sent only to Tuam; counties Donegal, Sligo and Wexford did not as a rule send women to special homes.

In 1947 the Roscommon county manager refused to pay for a pregnant woman who was returning from England to go to anywhere other than the county home - which she refused to enter.

"Rat-trap under one bed" – Monaghan County Council County Home²⁰

The county home in Castleblaney was reported in 1926 to be undergoing major improvements. It is unclear whether they were carried out. In 1948 the floor in the day nursery which was used as a dining room for mothers and babies, was 'rotting in many places'; the open fire place was broken; plaster was peeling from the walls and one corner was very damp. The floor in the mothers' dormitory was also rotting and there were large holes along the skirting board and a rat trap under one bed. The nearby bath had not been useable for some months 'as the water cannot get away'.

Unmarried mothers not a priority – no privacy even for their beds.²¹

The investment in county homes was designed to create appropriate accommodation for the 'elderly' and 'infirm'. Unmarried mothers were not a priority. Inspectors' reports indicate that most unmarried mothers had no privacy or personal space. There is no indication that beds in mothers' dormitories were screened by curtains; in several instances there would not have been sufficient space between the beds. Many homes did not even provide women with a locker to store personal belongings.

Mothers in the county home in Killarney had to store personal belongings in a suitcase which was kept in a cloakroom.

Councils saved money by keeping mothers in County Homes as opposed to sending them to the external mother-and-baby homes

The organisation, financing and running of a county home was determined by the local authority and funding came from local taxes. The value of the unpaid labour carried out by unmarried mothers remained a key consideration in the decisions made by local authorities on sending women to special mother and baby homes or keeping them in the county home.²² In 1931 Tipperary South board of health and public assistance estimated that the weekly cost of a mother and baby in the county home was 6s each, which was roughly half the cost of maintaining them in a mother and baby home. The significantly lower cost reflects the inferior conditions in a county home plus the value of the unpaid work performed by the mothers.

The most damning evidence of the draconian work regime in Athy is given in Miss Litster's observations of one nine-week-old infant: "Appears healthy, clean and well cared for. She was however, lying in her cradle with a half-emptied bottle of milk beside her. I suggested to her mother in the presence of Matron and the nurses that she should be lap-fed and not put into her cradle until

²⁰ Section 10.33, do.

²¹ Section 10.38, do.

²² Section 10.51

she had finished the feed. The excuse she gave was that she would never get her work done if she had to spend so much time feeding the baby.” A perusal of the inspector’s reports indicated that this was not an unusual occurrence where the mother’s work-obligations were given priority over her minding her baby.

An exception that proves the rule

The Wicklow County Council County Home in Rathdrum is one of the only homes where the Inspector could record any positive about the circumstances. She described the Wicklow county home in Rathdrum, ‘as one of the few homes where unmarried mothers were treated like human beings’.²³ The question is not why Wicklow should be one of the few good ones but why the others were so appallingly bad.

Neglect of children with disabilities in the County Council County Homes

However many of the children had severe physical or intellectual disabilities. When Margaret Reidy inspected the unmarried mothers and children in the Tipperary North County Council County Home in 1958, she found three children in the nursery, two invalids - a spina bifida and a hydrocephalic - and an apparently normal healthy baby. The infant was feeding itself from a bottle which was propped on the pillow and there was evidence that the two invalid children (who because of their disability were lying on their backs) had fed themselves also as partially empty feeding-bottles were on the floor beside their cots. The two invalids were lying on bare mackintoshes and it appeared to me that quite a time had elapsed from when they were given care last. The door was closed and the children were unsupervised.

The other children were in a Dayroom which looked equally unkempt and neglected, a ‘bad’ low-grade (female) mental defective was eating bread which was being shared by the toddlers from the floor which was far from clean and which had been ‘abused’ by the toddlers. Altogether, it was described as being “a very distressing sight”.²⁴

The matron, who was out visiting the dentist, ‘pointed out that the care of invalid children and low-grade defectives was very time-absorbing, that there were fewer unmarried mothers now in institutions than in the past to assist’.²⁵

²³ Section 10.56

²⁴ Section 10.77

²⁵ Section 10.78, do.

Conclusion: “Local authorities ... probably connived in retaining women in primitive County Homes”²⁶

Local authorities acquiesced, indeed probably connived at the retention of single mothers, because they valued their unpaid work. The conditions in Ireland’s county homes were primitive, lacking in privacy and dignity, and they were utterly unsuitable for children. Until the 1950s the mothers in most of the homes (perhaps all) were required to carry out physically-demanding, unpleasant chores in primitive conditions.

The type of work that was required of unmarried mothers in county homes was far in excess of the work that was expected of women in mother and baby homes, and until the 1950s, and in some cases the 1960s, the living conditions for both mothers and children in the county homes remained largely unchanged from the pre-independence workhouse.

²⁶ Section 10.82, do.

List of City and County Council Homes where mothers-and-babies were accommodated

Carlow, Sacred Heart Home and Hospital,

Cavan, St Felim's County Home and Hospital

Clare, Kilrush Workhouse.

Cork (City) Officially designated Cork County Home and District hospital in the 1920s; started to be called St Finbarr's from 1950s

Cork (Midleton) Our Lady of Lourdes Home,

(Clonakilty) Mount Carmel Home, Clonakilty

(Fermoy) St Patrick's Hospital,

Donegal (Stranorlar) St Joseph's Home

Dublin (St Kevin's Institution) Initially the Dublin Union; designated St Kevin's Institution in the 1920s (St Kevin's Hospital was on the same site); now St James's Hospital

Galway (Loughrea) St Brendan's Home, Loughrea

Kerry (Killarney) St Columbanus Home, Killarney

Kildare (Athy) St Vincent's Hospital, Athy

Kilkenny (Thomastown) St Columba's Hospital, Thomastown

Laois (Mountmellick) St Vincent's Hospital, Mountmellick

Leitrim (Carrick-on-Shannon) St Patrick's Home, Carrick-on-Shannon

Limerick (Newcastlewest) St Ita's Home, Newcastlewest

Limerick (City Home and Hospital) St Camillus Hospital,

Longford St Joseph's Hospital, Longford

Mayo (Castlebar) Sacred Heart Home, Castlebar

Meath (Trim) St Joseph's Home, Trim

Monaghan (Castleblayney) St Mary's Hospital, Castleblayney

Offaly (Tullamore) St Vincent's Hospital, Tullamore

Roscommon Sacred Heart Home, Roscommon

Sligo St John's Hospital, Sligo

Tipperary North (Thurles) Hospital of the Assumption,

Tipperary South (Cashel) St Patrick's Hospital, Cashel

Waterford (Dungarvan) St John's Hospital, Dungarvan

Westmeath (Mullingar) St Mary's Hospital, Mullingar

Wexford (Enniscorthy) St John's Hospital, Enniscorthy

Wicklow (Rathdrum) St Colman's, Rathdrum