

Longford County Council statement following the publication of the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes

10th February 2021

This statement is a joint statement by Cathaoirleach of Longford County Council Cllr Paul Ross and Chief Executive of Longford County Council Paddy Mahon. It was delivered jointly at the February monthly meeting of Longford County Council.

Cathaoirleach Cllr Paul Ross: Following the publication of the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, An Taoiseach Micheál Martin issued a formal apology on behalf of the State to former residents of the Mother and Baby Home institutions.

The report depicts a grim picture of a cold and callous Ireland, which damaged the lives of thousands of people, by consigning them or their relatives to institutions across the country.

Unfortunately, in those institutions, mothers and babies suffered material and emotional deprivation. There were horrific rates of infant mortality. Women felt they were left with no choice but to give up their children for adoption.

Some 56,000 mothers and 57,000 children passed through the Mother and Baby homes between 1920 and 1998. The report also states that a further 25,000 mothers and a larger number of children were likely to have resided in the County Homes that were not examined by the Commission.

This report, which shines a light on yet another dark part of Ireland's very recent history, confirms in cold hard facts, what many of us already knew.

Significant numbers of Longford mothers and their children ended up in some of the homes studied. These include:

- Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home in Westmeath
- Dunboyne Mother and Baby Home in Meath
- Bethany House in Dublin
- Pelletstown (later known as St Patrick's) in Dublin
- Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea
- Bessborough in Cork
- And the Cork County Home

As Cathaoirleach of Longford County Council and on behalf of the Elected Members, I want to acknowledge and unreservedly apologise for the pain and suffering caused to these girls, these young women and their babies; the survivors and those now deceased, and their relatives.

We are sorry for the role that this local authority played in those times and for its involvement with these homes.

I also want to acknowledge the generations of our own mothers and babies whom, unsupported by state and society in their own county, ended up in Mother and Baby Homes in other counties around the country. They deserved better than this.

Chief Executive Paddy Mahon: Reading testimonies in the report, I was struck by the harrowing experiences and the sheer heartbreak that these mothers and their children must have endured.

This report outlines the role that this local authority and its County Manager played in determining the fate of mothers and their children.

While institutions based in County Longford were not a primary focus of this Mother and Baby Homes Report, Longford people will be familiar with the role played by the County Home during these dark times.

Longford County Council ran the County Home and its successor, St Joseph's from 1942 until 1971, when the Midland Health Board took over. The County Home had a maternity unit where unmarried mothers could go, and many of the children born there were "boarded out" to foster homes. Some were also adopted.

The report mentions five toddlers who were transferred from Pelletstown in Dublin to the Convent of Mercy, Longford due to overcrowding. This is understood to refer to the Newtownforbes Industrial School.

Clothing allowances were paid by local authorities for boarded out children and the report says children in Longford were "very badly clad since the outbreak of the war".

In the mid-1950s, Longford's County Manager approved a number of American adoptions resulting in increased anxiety among children boarded out in Longford who feared for their futures.

The report also cites how pressure was exerted on unmarried mothers by Longford's County Medical Officer to allow their children to be adopted. They were led to believe that there was no alternative. Boarding out or foster homes were not even mentioned as an option.

After 1942, records show that Councils and County Managers became key decision makers in relation to provision for unmarried girls and mothers. The report provides examples of how Longford's County Manager sought maintenance payments from families of girls or women who were admitted to mother and baby homes. These families may have been unaware of the situations facing their daughter, sister, niece or granddaughter or of the decisions being made about them.

Longford County Council was one of five local authorities (along with Meath, Westmeath, Cavan and Louth) that came together to fund the Dunboyne Mother and Baby Home. It was run by the Good Shepherd Sisters in County Meath from 1955 until 1991. It was initially designed for women on second or subsequent pregnancies, but the vast majority were first-time mothers.

Of the Mother and Baby Homes studied by the Commission, the Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home had the highest rate of admissions of girls or women who gave their previous address as County Longford. It opened in 1935 and closed in 1971 and was run by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The public health authorities contributed towards the costs of women admitted there. The Commission's report has identified that there were 247 deaths among children connected with the home, mostly within their first year of life.

In my capacity as Chief Executive of Longford County Council, I also want to acknowledge the pain and distress suffered and I apologise unreservedly for the decisions taken that impacted all those who experienced life in these institutions.

We are sorry for the part that this Council played in exacerbating the trauma of these girls and women, their children and their wider families and for not recognising their plight during these times.

Cathaoirleach Cllr Paul Ross: The Government now intends to give detailed consideration to the Report over the coming months with a view to developing a comprehensive Government Action Plan spanning 8 themes, as follows:

- A survivor-centred approach;

- Apology;
- Access to Personal Information;
- Archiving and Databases;
- Education and Research;
- Memorialisation;
- Restorative Recognition;
- and Dignified Burial.

Longford County Council wishes to be associated with the State apology issued by An Taoiseach. Our Council will actively participate with Government in furthering the development of its Action Plan as it relates to local government. The Council is committed to supporting local measures that form part of the suite of follow-up actions, including for example, in relation to memorialisation and access to archives and records.

The testimony in this report shows the cruel attitudes, heartless treatment and wilful ignorance that was displayed towards these mothers and children, on our own doorstep.

As a parent myself reading it, I am appalled that this happened, and that it happened so recently. I can only imagine the distress that they must have gone through.

These mothers and their children did nothing wrong. They did not deserve to be treated this way by state or society.

Ends

Queries should be directed to Longford County Council Communications Officer Denise Canavan on mediaenquiries@longfordcoco.ie or 043 33 43362.