



Deputy Sean Crowe
Chairperson Oireachtas Health Committee
Leinster House
Kildare St
Dublin 2

31 January 2023

RE: Leadership Role of Health Committee following Publication of the Review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act

Dear Deputy Crowe,

With the culmination of the independent Review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act now imminent, it is timely to consider the next steps for evidence-led abortion reform following the Chair, Marie O'Shea's, report and recommendations.

Given the significance of this Review for the women of Ireland, it is critical that there is a transparent process and political accountability for abortion reform following this extensive independent analysis. Existing evidence, which will likely inform the final report, highlights significant legal barriers to abortion access, for example, the criminalisation of service providers, the challenges faced by those seeking care for fatal foetal anomalies and the adverse impact of the 3-day mandatory wait. These are intertwined with continued practice-based challenges such as the low numbers of GPs providing abortion care in rural Ireland and the ongoing failure of many of our public maternity hospitals to provide full care in line with the law four years on from legislation enactment. These are pressing and complex issues which cumulatively undermine women's access to what is a central aspect of reproductive healthcare. Addressing these following this independent analysis will require careful cross-party reflection and political leadership.

At the National Women's Council, we believe that Health Committee is the most appropriate setting for deliberation and consideration of the issues at stake and is best placed to develop the report outlining how these issues can be addressed. I suggest this for two principal reasons. The Health Committee has:

- Requisite substantive knowledge of our abortion services, as well as a strong track-record of independent oversight and monitoring of them, namely through evidence sessions on the Review in 2021 and 2022, as well as ongoing scrutiny of the Safe Access Zones legislation.
- Significant expertise in the health system and service delivery, as well a detailed understanding of existing recruitment and capacity challenges. This will enable the Committee to contextualise abortion care within broader Sláintecare reforms and chart an implementation approach which is cognisant of this wider context.



It is my view, as well as the view of our wider Abortion Working Group - the national network of over 20 civil society organisations and healthcare providers, who have been closely following abortion implementation - that to establish a special committee at this critical juncture would be a misstep. Rather, we believe that the Health Committee, supported by expert-stakeholder input, including from international specialists such as the WHO Abortion Policy Unit, as well as the Review research strand leads, Dr Catherine Conlon and Dr Deirdre Duffy, provides the most appropriate all-party pathway to evidence-led policy and practice reform. The Committee's final report could be submitted to the wider Oireachtas for consideration by the summer recess and would provide the strategic guidance to Government for drafting legislative amendments as required.

I would be grateful if the Health Committee could signal its commitment to taking this forward as part of its Spring programme of work and would be pleased to meet with you to discuss the importance of using this cross-party pathway for the further development of evidence-based abortion law and services.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Orla O'Connor".

Orla O'Connor

Director, National Women's Council